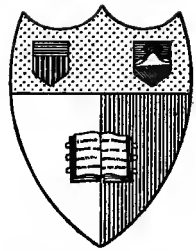
SIX PLAYS

By Florence Henrietta Darwin
with an Introduction by Cecil Sharp
and a
Memoir and Portrait of the Author

W. Heffer & Sons Ltd.,
Cambridge, 1921.



Cornell University Library

Ithaca, New York

BOUGHT WITH THE INCOME OF THE

SAGE ENDOWMENT FUND

THE GIFT OF

HENRY W. SAGE

1891

Cornell University Library
PR 6007.A79S6

Six plays,


3 1924 013 603 752

olin



The original of this book is in
the Cornell University Library.

There are no known copyright restrictions in
the United States on the use of the text.

http://www.archive.org/details/cu31924013603752

THE LOVERS' TASKS
& FIVE OTHER PLAYS

LONDON AGENTS

SIMPKIN, MARSHALL, HAMILTON, KENT & Co. Ltd.



FLORENCE HENRIETTA DARWIN.

SIX PLAYS

By FLORENCE HENRIETTA DARWIN
and an Introduction by CECIL SHARP

. . . . . .

Memoir and Portrait of the Author

W. HEFFER & SONS LTD.,
CAMBRIDGE, 1921.

RD

A507656

SIX PLAYS

BY

FLORENCE HENRIETTA DARWIN

The Plays may be had in paper covers at

1s. 6d. net as under

1. LOVERS' TASKS
2. BUSHES & BRIARS
3. MY MAN JOHN
4. PRINCESS ROYAL
5. THE SEEDS OF LOVE

In one volume

6. THE NEW YEAR

W. HEFFER & SONS LTD.
CAMBRIDGE

INTRODUCTION

I HAVE been asked to write a few lines of introduction to these volumes of Country Plays, and I do so, not because I can claim any right to speak with authority on the subject of drama, but in order that I may associate myself and express my sympathy with the endeavour which the author has made to restore to his rightful estate the English peasant with whom my work for twenty years or more has brought me into close relations.

There have been few serious attempts to depict English country life on the stage. Nor, for that matter, can it be said that the English peasant has fared over well in our literature. Nevertheless, the English countryman has qualities all his own, no less distinctive nor less engaging than those of his Irish, Scottish, Russian, or Continental neighbours, even though his especial characteristics have hitherto been for the most part either ignored or grossly travestied by the playwright. Now in these plays, as it seems to me, he has at last come into his own kingdom and is painted, perhaps for the first time on the stage, in his true colours, neither caricatured on the one hand, nor, on the other, sentimentalised, but faithfully portrayed by a peculiarily sympathetic and skilful hand.

It is well, too, that an authentic record should be preserved of the life that has been lived in our country villages year in year out for centuries before its last vestiges—and they are all that now remain—have been completely submerged in the oncoming tide of modern civilisation and progress. Moreover, the songs and dances of the English peasantry that have become widely known in the last few years have awakened a

general interest and curiosity in all that concerns the lives and habits of country people and there are many who will be glad to know what manner of men and women were they who created things of so rare and delicate a beauty.

These plays are very simple plays. With one exception, "The New Year," they rest for their effects upon dialogue rather than upon dramatic action or plot. There is nothing harrowing, problematical, or pathological about any of them. The stories are as simple, obvious and naïve, and have the same happy endings as those which the folk delight to sing about in their own songs, and from which, indeed, judging by the titles she has given to her plays, the author drew her inspiration.

It will be noticed that Lady Darwin has eliminated dialect from the speech which she has put into the mouths of her characters. This is not because the English villager has no vernacular of his own—there are as many dialects in England as there are counties—but because dialect, as no doubt Lady Darwin knew full well, is not of the essence of speech. It is the way in which language is used for the purpose of expression, the order in which words are strung together, the subtle, elusive turns of speech, the character of its figures and metaphors, rather than local peculiarities of intonation and pronunciation, which betray and illumine character. And it is upon these, the essential characteristics of speech, that the author of these plays has wisely and, for the most part, wholly, relied to give life and character to the actors of her dramas. The results she has achieved by these means is nothing less than amazing. So accurately has she caught the peculiar inflections, the inversions, the curious meanderings and involutions of peasant speech, so penetrating—uncanny at times—is her insight into the structure and working of the peasant mind, that, did one not know that this was scarcely the fact, one would have been tempted to suspect that the author had herself been born and bred

in a country village and lived all her days amongst those whose characters and habits of mind she has described with such fidelity.

Take, for instance, the lesson on courtship which My Man John gives to his master—is not the actual phrasing almost photographic in its accuracy? Note, too, the frequent use of homely metaphor:—

> 'Tis with the maids as 'tis with the fowls when they be come out from moult. They be bound to pick about this way and that in their new feathers.
>
> I warrant she be gone shy as a May bettel when 'tis daylight.
>
> Ah, you take and let her go quiet, same as I lets th' old mare when her first comes up from grass.
>
> I likes doing things my own way, mother. Womenfolk, they be so buzzing. 'Tis like a lot of insects around of any one on a summer's day. A-saying this way and that—whilst a man do go at everything quiet and calm-like.

and the following typical sentences:—

> Well, mother, I count I'm back a smartish bit sooner nor what you did expect.
>
> There was a cow—well, 'tis a smartish lot of cows as I've seen in my time, but this one, why, the king haven't got the match to she in all his great palace, and that's the truth, so 'tis.
>
> I bain't one as can judge of that, my lord, seeing that I be got a poor old badger of a man, and the days when I was young and did carry a heart what could beat with love, be ahind of I, and the feel of them clean forgot.

The task of selection has not been an easy one. "The New Year" is the only Country play on large and ambitious lines which Lady Darwin left behind her, and it is on this account, as well as for its own merits, which I venture to think are very considerable, that it has been included. "Princess Royal" was

written for a special occasion, and is frankly more conventional and artificial than the others, but it will nevertheless appeal to folk-dancers, and for that reason, rather than perhaps for its intrinsic value, room has been found for it. The remaining four are, in their several ways, typical of the author's work, and I for one have little doubt but that they will make a wide appeal, more especially perhaps to those simple-minded people (of whom I am persuaded there are many, even in these latter-days) who are able to appreciate the unpretentious beauty of an art that is well-nigh artless in its simplicity. Some of them may be too slight in design, too delicate in texture, their beauty too elusive, to succeed on the professional stage; I do not know. But there is a large demand for plays of a non-professional character; and that Lady Darwin's will be acted with pleasure and listened to with delight in hut or hall or country-house of a winter's evening, I cannot doubt.

CECIL SHARP.

FLORENCE HENRIETTA DARWIN

FLORENCE HENRIETTA FISHER was born at 3, Onslow Square, London, in the year 1864; but to those of a younger generation it seemed that nearly the whole of her youth had been spent in the New Forest, so largely did it figure in her stories of the past. It was at Whitley Ridge, Brockenhurst, that her earliest plays were written, and many marvellous characters created; their names still live. It was there that she became a very good violin player, as well as a musician in a wider sense. It was in Brockenhurst Church that, in 1886, she married Frederic William Maitland, later Downing professor of the laws of England.

Mr. and Mrs. Maitland lived in Cambridge; for the first two years at Brookside, and afterwards in the West Lodge of Downing College.

Along with her love of music there had begun, and there continued a love of animals, and, from Moses, a dog of Brockenhurst days, there stretched down a long procession of dogs, cats, monkeys, foxes, moles, merecats, mongeese, bush cats and marmosets, accompanied by a variety of birds. If such a thing as a dumb animal has ever existed it certainly was not one of hers, for, besides what they were able to say for themselves, they spoke much through her. Not only were they able to recount all that had happened to them in past home or jungle, they were perfectly able to give advice in every situation and to join in every discussion. Neither were their pens less ready than their tongues, and many were the letters of flamboyant script and misspelt word that came forth from cage or basket.

Frederic William Maitland possessed a small property at Brookthorpe, Gloucestershire; and near this property, in a house in the village of Edge and at the top of the Horsepools hill, he and his wife and their two children

spent most of their holidays. They were happy days. Animals increased in number and rejoiced in freedom, fairs were attended, dancing bears and bird carts came at intervals to the door, gipsies were delighted in and protected, and it was there that many friendships with country people were made. Several days a week would find Mrs. Maitland driving down to Brookthorpe in donkey or pony cart to see tenants, to enquire for or feed the sick, to visit the school, to advise and be advised in the many difficulties of human life. With a wonderful memory and power of reproducing that which she had heard, she brought back rare harvest from these expeditions. All through her days she was told more in a week than many people hear in a life-time.

After much illness, Professor Maitland was told that he must leave England, and in 1898 the Maitlands set sail to the island of Grand Canary; and it was there that they spent each winter, with the exception of one in Madeira, until Professor Maitland's death in 1906. The beauty and warmth of the island were a joy to Mrs. Maitland, washing out all the difficulties of housekeeping and the labour of cooking. The day of hardest work still left her time to set forth, accompanied by a faithful one-legged hen, to seek the shade of chestnut or loquat tree, and there to write. The song of frogs rising from watery palm grove, the hot dusty scent of pepper tree, the cool scent of orange, the mountains sharp and black against the evening sky, the brightly coloured houses crowded to the brink of still brighter sea, were all things she loved, and their images remained with her always. She became an expert talker of what she called kitchen Spanish, and her store of country history increased greatly, for, from Candelaria, the washer-woman to Don Luis the grocer, she met no one who was not ready to tell her all the marvels that ever they knew.

In 1906 Frederic William Maitland landed on the island too ill to reach the house that Mrs. Maitland had gone out earlier to prepare for him. He was taken to an

hotel in the city of Las Palmas, and there, on December the 19th, he died.

In the spring of 1907 Mrs. Maitland returned to England.

In 1909 she added on to a small farm house at Brookthorpe, and there she went to live. She was thus able to renew many friendships, and in some slight degree take up the life that had been so dear to her. It was during these last eleven years at Brookthorpe that she wrote all her plays dealing with country people; the first for a class of village children to whom she taught singing, the later ones in response to a growing demand not only from other Gloucestershire villages, but from village clubs and institutes scattered over a large part of England. She saw several of her plays acted by the Oakridge and the Sapperton players, and these performances and letters from other performers gave her great pleasure.

In 1913 she married Sir Francis Darwin. Their life at Brookthorpe was varied by months spent at his house in Cambridge. It was there that she died on March 5th, 1920.

During her last years she had much illness to contend with. Unable to play her violin, she turned to the spinet. She practised for hours, wrote plays, and attended to her house when many would have lain in their beds.

Her religion became of increasingly great comfort and interest to her, and it was in that light that she came, more and more, to look at all things.

In the minds of many who knew her in those years rose up the words: I have fought a good fight.

E. M.

THE LOVERS' TASKS

CHARACTERS

FARMER DANIEL,
ELIZABETH, *his wife.*
MILLIE, *her daughter.*
ANNET, *his niece.*
MAY, *Annet's sister, aged ten.*
GILES, *their brother.*
ANDREW, *a rich young farmer.*
GEORGE, JOHN } *servants to Giles.*
AN OLD MAN.

THE LOVERS' TASKS.

ACT I.—Scene 1.

The parlour at Camel Farm.
Time: An afternoon in May.

ELIZABETH *is sewing by the table with* ANNET. *At the open doorway* MAY *is polishing a bright mug.*

ELIZABETH. [*Looking up.*] There's Uncle, back from the Fair.

MAY. [*Looking out of the door.*] O Uncle's got some rare big packets in his arms, he has.

ELIZABETH. Put down that mug afore you damage it, May; and, Annet, do you go and help your uncle in.

MAY. [*Setting down the mug.*] O let me go along of her too—

[ANNET *rises and goes to the door followed by* MAY, *who has dropped her polishing leather upon the ground.*

ELIZABETH. [*Picking it up and speaking to herself in exasperation.*] If ever there was a careless little wench, 'tis she. I never did hold with the bringing up of other folks children and if I'd had my way, 'tis to the poor-house they'd have went, instead of coming here where I've enough to do with my own.

[*The* FARMER *comes in followed by* ANNET *and* MAY *carrying large parcels.*

DANIEL. Well Mother, I count I'm back a smartish bit sooner nor what you did expect.

ELIZABETH. I'm not one that can be taken by surprise, Dan. May, lay that parcel on the table at once, and put away your uncle's hat and overcoat.

DAN. Nay, the overcoat's too heavy for the little maid—I'll hang it up myself.

[*He takes off his coat and goes out into the passage to hang it up. May runs after him with his hat.*

ANNET. I do want to know what's in all those great packets, Aunt.

ELIZABETH. I daresay you'll be told all in good season. Here, take up and get on with that sewing, I dislike to see young people idling away their time.

[*The* FARMER *and* MAY *come back.*

MAY. And now, untie the packets quickly, uncle.

DANIEL. [*Sinking into a big chair.*] Not so fast, my little maid, not so fast—'tis a powerful long distance as I have journeyed this day, and 'tis wonderful warm for the time of year.

ELIZABETH. I don't hold with drinking nor with taking bites atween meals, but as your uncle has come a good distance, and the day is warm, you make take the key of the pantry, Annet, and draw a glass of cider for him.

[*She takes the key from her pocket and hands it to* ANNET, *who goes out.*

DANIEL. That's it, Mother—that's it. And when I've wetted my mouth a bit I'll be able the better to tell you all about how 'twas over there.

MAY. O I'd dearly like to go to a Fair, I would. You always said that you'd take me the next time you went, Uncle.

DANIEL. Ah and so I did, but when I comed to think it over, Fairs baint the place for little maids, I says to mother here—and no, that they baint, she answers back. But we'll see how 'tis when you be growed a bit older, like. Us'll see how 'twill be then, won't us Mother ?

ELIZABETH. I wouldn't encourage the child in her nonsense, if I was you, Dan. She's old enough to know

better than to ask to be taken to such places. Why in all my days I never set my foot within a fair, pleasure or business, nor wanted to, either.

MAY. And never rode on the pretty wood horses, Aunt, all spotted and with scarlet bridles to them ?

ELIZABETH. Certainly not. I wonder at your asking such a question, May. But you do say some very unsuitable things for a little child of your age.

MAY. And did you get astride of the pretty horses at the Fair, Uncle ?

DANIEL. Nay, nay,—they horses be set in the pleasure part of the Fair, and where I goes 'tis all for doing business like.

[ANNET *comes back with the glass of cider.* DANIEL *takes it from her.*

DANIEL. [*Drinking.*] You might as well have brought the jug, my girl.

ELIZABETH. No, Father, 'twill spoil your next meal as it is.

[*The girls sit down at the table, taking up their work.*

DANIEL. [*Putting down his glass.*] But, bless my soul, yon was a Fair in a hundred. That her was.

BOTH GIRLS. O do tell us of all that you did see there, Uncle.

DANIEL. There was a cow—well, 'tis a smartish lot of cows as I've seen in my time, but this one, why, the King haven't got the match to she in all his great palace, and that's the truth, so 'tis.

ANNET. O don't tell us about the cows, Uncle, we want to know about all the other things.

MAY. The shows of acting folk, and the wild animals, and the nice sweets.

ELIZABETH. They don't want to hear about anything sensible, Dan. They're like all the maids now, with their thoughts set on pleasuring and foolishness.

DANIEL. Ah, the maids was different in our day, wasn't they Mother ?

ELIZABETH. And that they were. Why, when I was

your age, Annet, I should have been ashamed if I couldn't have held my own in any proper or suitable conversation.

DANIEL. Ah, you was a rare sensible maid in your day, Mother. Do you mind when you comed along of me to Kingham sale? "You're never going to buy an animal with all that white to it, Dan," you says to me.

ELIZABETH. Ah—I recollect.

DANIEL. "'Tis true her has a whitish leg," I says, "but so have I, and so have you, Mother—and who's to think the worse on we for that?" Ah, I could always bring you round to look at things quiet and reasonable in those days—that I could.

ELIZABETH. And a good thing if there were others of the same pattern now, I'm thinking.

DANIEL. So 'twould be—so 'twould be. But times do bring changes in the forms of the cattle and I count 'tis the same with the womenfolk. 'Tis one thing this year and 'tis t'other in the next.

MAY. Do tell us more of what you did see at the Fair, Uncle.

DANIEL. There was a ram. My word! but the four feet of he did cover a good two yards of ground; just as it might be, standing.

ELIZABETH. Come, Father.

DANIEL. And the horns upon the head of he did reach out very nigh as far as might do the sails of one of they old wind-mills.

MAY. O Uncle, and how was it with the wool of him?

DANIEL. The wool, my wench, did stand a good three foot from all around of the animal. You might have set a hen with her eggs on top of it—and that you might. And now I comes to recollect how 'twas, you could have set a hen one side of the wool and a turkey t'other.

MAY. O Uncle, that must have been a beautiful animal! And what was the tail of it?

DANIEL. The tail, my little maid? Why 'twas longer nor my arm and as thick again—'twould have

served as a bell rope to the great bell yonder in Gloucester church—and so 'twould. Ah, 'twas sommat like a tail, I reckon, yon.

ELIZABETH. Come, Father, such talk is hardly suited to little girls, who should know better than to ask so many teasing questions.

ANNET. 'Tisn't only May, Aunt, I do love to hear what uncle tells, when he has been out for a day or two.

ELIZABETH. And did you have company on the way home, Father ?

DANIEL. That I did. 'Twas along of young Andrew as I did come back.

ELIZABETH. Along of Andrew ? Girls, you may now go outside into the garden for a while. Yes, put aside your work.

MAY. Can't we stop till the packets are opened ?

ELIZABETH. You heard what I said ? Go off into the garden, and stop there till I send for you. And take uncle's glass and wash it at the spout as you go.

ANNET. [*Taking the glass.*] I'll wash it, Aunt. Come May, you see aunt doesn't want us any longer.

MAY. Now they're going to talk secrets together. O I should dearly love to hear the secrets of grown-up people. [ANNET *and* MAY *go out together.*

DANIEL. Annet be got a fine big wench, upon my word. Now haven't her, Mother ?

ELIZABETH. She's got old enough to be put to service, and if I'd have had my way, 'tis to service she'd have gone this long time since, and that it is.

DANIEL. 'Twould be poor work putting one of dead sister's wenches out to service, so long as us have a roof over the heads of we and plenty to eat on the table.

ELIZABETH. Well, you must please yourself about it Father, as you do most times. But 'tis uncertain work taking up with other folks children as I told you from the first. See what a lot of trouble you and me have had along of Giles.

DANIEL. Giles be safe enough in them foreign parts

where I did send him. You've no need to trouble your head about he, Mother—unless 'tis a letter as he may have got sending to Mill.

ELIZABETH. No, Father, Giles has never sent a letter since the day he left home. But very often there is no need for letters to keep remembrance green. 'Tis a plant what thrives best on a soil that is bare.

DANIEL. Well, Mother, and what be you a-driving at? I warrant as Mill have got over them notions as she did have once. And, look you here, 'twas with young Andrew as I did journey back from the Fair. And he be a-coming up presently for to get his answer.

ELIZABETH. All I say is that I hope he may get it then.

DANIEL. Ah, I reckon as 'tis rare put about as he have been all this long while, and never a downright "yes" to what he do ask.

[MAY *comes softly in and hides behind the door.*

ELIZABETH. Well, that's not my fault, Father.

DANIEL. But her'll have to change her note this day, that her'll have. For I've spoke for she, and 'tis for next month as I've pitched the wedding day.

ELIZABETH. And you may pitch, Father. You may lead the mare down to the pond, but she'll not drink if she hasn't the mind to. You know what Millie is. 'Tisn't from my side that she gets it either.

DANIEL. And 'tain't from me. I be all for easy going and each one to his self like.

ELIZABETH. Yes, there you are, Father.

DANIEL. But I reckon as the little maid will hearken to what I says. Her was always a wonderful good little maid to her dad. And her did always know, that when her dad did set his foot down, well, there 'twas. 'Twas down.

ELIZABETH. Well, if you think you can shew her that, Father, 'tis a fortunate job on all sides.

[*They suddenly see* MAY *who has been quiet behind the door.*

ELIZABETH. May, what are you a-doing here I should

like to know ? Didn't I send you out into the garden along of your sister ?

MAY. Yes, Auntie, but I've comed back.

ELIZABETH. Then you can be off again, and shut the door this time, do your hear ?

DANIEL. That's it, my little maid. Run along—and look you, May, just you tell Cousin Millie as we wants her in here straight away. And who knows bye and bye whether there won't be sommat in yon great parcel for a good little wench.

MAY. O Uncle—I'd like to see it now.

DANIEL. Nay, nay—this is not a suitable time—Aunt and me has business what's got to be settled like. Nay—'tis later on as the packets is to be opened.

ELIZABETH. Get along off, you tiresome child.—One word might do for some, but it takes twenty to get you to move.—Run along now, do you hear me ?

[MAY *goes.*

Well, Father, I've done my share with Millie and she don't take a bit of notice of what I say. So now it's your turn.

DANIEL. Ah, I count 'tis more man's work, this here, so 'tis. There be things which belongs to females and there be others which do not. You get and leave it all to me. I'll bring it off.

ELIZABETH. All right, Father, just you try your way—I'll have nothing more to do with it.

[MILLIE *comes in.*]

MILLIE. Why, Father, you're back early from the Fair.

DANIEL. That's so, my wench. See that package over yonder ?

MILLIE. O, that I do, Father.

DANIEL. Yon great one's for you, Mill.

MILLIE. O Father, what's inside it ?

DANIEL. 'Tis a new, smart bonnet, my wench.

MILLIE. For me, Father ?

DANIEL. Ah—who else should it be for, Mill ?

MILLIE. O Father, you are good to me.

DANIEL. And a silk cloak as well.

MILLIE. A silken cloak, and a bonnet—O Father, 'tis too much for you to give me all at once, like.

DANIEL. Young Andrew did help me with the choice, and 'tis all to be worn on this day month, my girl.

MILLIE. Why, Father, what's to happen then ?

DANIEL. 'Tis for you to go along to church in, Mill.

MILLIE. To church, Father ?

DANIEL. Ah, that 'tis—you in the cloak and bonnet, and upon the arm of young Andrew, my wench.

MILLIE. O no, Father.

DANIEL. But 'tis "yes" as you have got to learn, my wench. And quickly too. For 'tis this very evening as Andrew be coming for his answer. And 'tis to be "yes" this time.

MILLIE. O no, Father.

DANIEL. You've an hour before you, my wench, in which to get another word to your tongue.

MILLIE. I can't learn any word that isn't "no," Father.

DANIEL. Look at me, my wench. My foot be down. I means what I says—

MILLIE. And I mean what I say, too, Father. And I say, No !

DANIEL. Millie, I've set down my foot.

MILLIE. And so have I, Father.

DANIEL. And 'tis "yes" as you must say to young Andrew when he do come a-courting of you this night.

MILLIE. That I'll never say, Father. I don't want cloaks nor bonnets, nor my heart moved by gifts, or tears brought to my eyes by fair words. I'll not wed unless I can give my love along with my hand. And 'tis not to Andrew I can give that, as you know.

DANIEL. And to whom should a maid give her heart if 'twasn't to Andrew ? A finer lad never trod in a pair of shoes. I'll be blest if I do know what the wenches be a-coming to.

ELIZABETH. There, Father, I told you what to expect.

DANIEL. But 'tis master as I'll be, hark you, Mother, hark you, Mill. And 'tis " Yes " as you have got to fit your tongue out with my girl, afore 'tis dark. [*Rising.*] I be a'going off to the yard, but, Mother, her'll know what to say to you, her will.

MILLIE. Dad, do you stop and shew me the inside of my packet. Let us put Andrew aside and be happy —do !

DANIEL. Ah, I've got other things as is waiting to be done nor breaking in a tricksome filly to run atween the shafts. 'Tis fitter work for females, and so 'tis.

ELIZABETH. And so I told you, Father, from the start.

MILLIE. And 'tis "No" that I shall say.

[*Curtain.*]

ACT I.—Scene 2.

It is dusk on the same evening.

MILLIE *is standing by the table folding up the silken cloak.* ANNET *sits watching her, on her knees lies a open parcel disclosing a woollen shawl. In a far corner of the room* MAY *is seated on a stool making a daisy chain.*

ANNET. 'Twas very good of Uncle to bring me this nice shawl, Millie.

MILLIE. You should have had a cloak like mine, Annet, by rights.

ANNET. I'm not going to get married, Millie.

MILLIE. [*Sitting down with a sudden movement of despondence and stretching her arms across the table.*] O don't you speak to me of that, Annet. 'Tis more than I can bear to-night.

ANNET. But, Millie, he's coming for your answer now. You musn't let him find you looking so.

MILLIE. My face shall look as my heart feels. And that is all sorrow, Annet.

ANNET. Can't you bring yourself round to fancy Andrew, Millie ?

MILLIE. No, that I cannot, Annet, I've tried a score of times, I have—but there it is—I cannot.

ANNET. Is it that you've not forgotten Giles, then ?

MILLIE. I never shall forget him, Annet. Why, 'tis a five year this day since father sent him off to foreign parts, and never a moment of all that time has my heart not remembered him.

ANNET. I feared 'twas so with you, Millie.

MILLIE. O I've laid awake of nights and my tears have wetted the pillow all over so that I've had to turn it t'other side up.

ANNET. And Giles has never written to you, nor sent a sign nor nothing ?

MILLIE. Your brother Giles was never very grand with the pen, Annet. But, O, he's none the worse for that.

ANNET. Millie, I never cared for to question you, but how was it when you and he did part, one with t'other ?

MILLIE. I did give him my ring, Annet—secret like —when we were walking in the wood.

ANNET. What, the one with the white stones to it ?

MILLIE. Yes, grandmother's ring, that she left me. And I did say to him—if ever I do turn false to you and am like to wed another, Giles—look you at these white stones.

ANNET. Seven of them, there were, Millie.

MILLIE. And the day that I am like to wed another, Giles, I said to him, the stones shall darken. But you'll never see that day. [*She begins to cry.*

ANNET. Don't you give way, Millie, for, look you, 'tis very likely that Giles has forgotten you for all his fine words, and Andrew,—well, Andrew he's as grand a suitor as ever maid had. And 'tis Andrew you have got to wed, you know.

MILLIE. Andrew, Andrew—I'm sick at the very name of him.

ANNET. See the fine house you'll live in. Think on the grand parlour that you'll sit in all the day with a servant to wait on you and naught but Sunday clothes on your back.

MILLIE. I'd sooner go in rags with Giles at the side of me.

ANNET. Come, you must hearten up. Andrew will soon be here. And Uncle says that you have got to give him his answer to-night for good and all.

MILLIE. O I cannot see him—I'm wearied to death of Andrew, and that's the very truth it is.

ANNET. O Millie—I wonder how 'twould feel to be you for half-an-hour and to have such a fine suitor coming to me and asking for me to say Yes.

MILLIE. O I wish 'twas you and not me that he was after, Annet.

ANNET. 'Tisn't likely that anyone such as Master Andrew will ever come courting a poor girl like me, Millie. But I'd dearly love to know how 'twould feel.

[MILLIE *raises her head and looks at her cousin for a few minutes in silence, then her face brightens.*

MILLIE. Then you shall, Annet.

ANNET. Shall what, Mill ?

MILLIE. Know how it feels. Look here—'Tis sick to death I am with courting, when 'tis from the wrong quarter, and if I'm to wed Andrew come next month, I'll not be tormented with him before that time,—so 'tis you that shall stop and talk with him this evening, Annet, and I'll slip out to the woods and gather flowers.

ANNET. How wild and unlikely you do talk, Mill.

MILLIE. In the dusk he'll never know that 'tisn't me. Being cousins, we speak after the same fashion, and in the shape of us there's not much that's amiss.

ANNET. But in the clothing of us, Mill—why, 'tis a grand young lady that you look—whilst I——

MILLIE. [*Taking up the silken cloak.*] Here—put this over your gown, Annet.

ANNET. [*Standing up.*] I don't mind just trying it on, like.

MILLIE. [*Fastening it.*] There—and now the bonnet, with the veil pulled over the face.

[*She ties the bonnet and arranges the veil on* ANNET.

MILLIE. [*Standing back and surveying her cousin.*] There, Annet, there May, who is to tell which of us 'tis ?

MAY. [*Coming forward.*] O I should never know that 'twasn't you, Cousin Mill.

MILLIE. And I could well mistake her for myself too, so listen, Annet. 'Tis you that shall talk with Master Andrew when he comes to-night. And 'tis you that shall give him my answer. I'll not burn my lips by speaking the word he asks of me.

ANNET. O Mill—I cannot—no I cannot.

MILLIE. Don't let him have it very easily, Annet. Set him a ditch or two to jump before he gets there. And let the thorns prick him a bit before he gathers the flower. You know my way with him.

MAY. And I know it too, Millie—Why, your tongue, 'tis very near as sharp as when Aunt do speak.

ANNET. O Millie, take off these things—I cannot do it, that's the truth.

MAY. [*Looking out through the door.*] There's Andrew a-coming over the mill yard.

MILLIE. Here, sit down, Annet, with the back of you to the light.

[*She pushes* ANNET *into a chair beneath the window.*

MAY. Can I get into the cupboard and listen to it, Cousin Mill ?

MILLIE. If you promise to bide quiet and to say naught of it afterwards.

MAY. O I promise, I promise—I'll just leave a crack of the door open for to hear well.

[MAY *gets into the cupboard.* MILLIE *takes up* ANNET'S *new shawl and puts it all over her.*

MILLIE. No one will think that 'tisn't you, in the dusk.

ANNET. O Millie, what is it that you've got me to do?

MILLIE. Never you mind, Annet—you shall see what 'tis to have a grand suitor and I shall get a little while of quiet out yonder, where I can think on Giles.

[*She runs out of the door just as* ANDREW *comes up.* ANDREW *knocks and then enters the open door.*

ANDREW. Where's Annet off to in such a hurry?

ANNET. [*Very faintly.*] I'm sure I don't know.

[ANDREW *lays aside his hat and comes up to the window. He stands before* ANNET *looking down on her. She becomes restless under his gaze, and at last signs to him to sit down.*

ANDREW. [*Sitting down on a chair a little way from her.*] The Master said that I might come along to-night, Millie—Otherwise—— [ANNET *is still silent.* Otherwise I shouldn't have dared do so.

[ANNET *sits nervously twisting the ribbons of her cloak.*

The Master said, as how may be, your feeling for me, Millie, might be changed like. [ANNET *is still silent.* And that if I was to ask you once more, very likely 'twould be something different as you might say.

[*A long silence.*

Was I wrong in coming, Millie?

ANNET. [*Faintly.*] 'Twould have been better had you stayed away like.

ANDREW. Then there isn't any change in your feelings towards me, Millie?

ANNET. O, there's a sort of a change, Andrew.

ANDREW. [*Slowly.*] O Mill, that's good hearing. What sort of a change is it then?

ANNET. 'Tis very hard to say, Andrew.

ANDREW. Look you, Mill, 'tis more than a five year that I've been a-courting of you faithful.

ANNET. [*Sighing.*] Indeed it is, Andrew.

ANDREW. And I've never got naught but blows for my pains.

ANNET. [*Beginning to speak in a gentle voice and ending sharply.*] O I'm so sorry—No—I mean—'Tis your own fault, Andrew.

ANDREW. But I would sooner take blows from you than sweet words from another, Millie.

ANNET. I could never find it in my heart to—I mean, 'tis as well that you should get used to blows, seeing we're to be wed, Andrew.

ANDREW. Then 'tis to be! O Millie, this is brave news—Why, I do scarcely know whether I be awake or dreaming.

ANNET. [*Very sadly.*] Very likely you'll be glad enough to be dreaming a month from now, poor Andrew.

ANDREW. [*Drawing nearer.*] I am brave, Millie, now that you speak to me so kind and gentle, and I'll ask you to name the day.

ANNET. [*Shrinking back.*] O 'twill be a very long distance from now, Andrew.

ANDREW. Millie, it seems to be your pleasure to take up my heart and play with it same as a cat does with the mouse.

ANNET. [*Becoming gay and hard in her manner.*] Your heart, Andrew? 'Twill go all the better afterwards if 'tis tossed about a bit first.

ANDREW. Put an end to this foolishness, Mill, and say when you'll wed me.

ANNET. [*Warding him off with her hand.*] You shall have my answer in a new song Andrew, which I have been learning.

[ANDREW *sits down despondently and prepares to listen.*

ANNET. Now hark you to this, Andrew, and turn it well over in your mind. [*She begins to sing*:

Say can you plough me an acre of land
Sing Ivy leaf, Sweet William and Thyme.
Between the sea and the salt sea strand
And you shall be a true lover of mine?

[*A slight pause.* ANNET *looks questioningly at* ANDREW, *who turns away with a heavy sigh.*

ANNET. [*Singing.*]

Yes, if you plough it with one ram's horn
Sing Ivy Leaf, Sweet William and Thyme
And sow it all over with one peppercorn
And you shall be a true lover of mine.

ANDREW. 'Tis all foolishness.

ANNET. [*Singing.*]

Say can you reap with a sickle of leather
Sing Ivy Leaf, Sweet William and Thyme
And tie it all up with a Tom-tit's feather
And you shall be a true lover of mine.

ANDREW. [*Rises up impatiently.*] I can stand no more. You've danced upon my heart till 'tis fairly brittle, and ready to be broke by a feather.

ANNET. [*Very gently.*] O Andrew, I'll mend your heart one day.

ANDREW. Millie, the sound of those words has mended it already.

ANNET. [*In a harder voice.*] But very likely there'll be a crack left to it always.

[FARMER DANIEL *and* ELIZABETH *come into the room.*

DANIEL. Well my boy, well Millie ?

ANDREW. [*Boldly.*] 'Tis for a month from now.

DANIEL. Bless my soul. Hear that, Mother ? Hear that ?

ELIZABETH. I'm not deaf, Father.

DANIEL. [*Shaking* ANDREW'S *hand.*] Ah my boy, I knowed as you'd bring the little maid to the senses of she.

ELIZABETH. Millie has not shown any backwardness in clothing herself as though for church.

DANIEL. 'Tis with the maids as 'tis with the fowls when they be come out from moult. They be bound to pick about this way and that in their new feathers.

ELIZABETH. Well, 'tis to be hoped the young people have fixed it up for good and all this time.

DANIEL. Come Mill, my wench, you be wonderful quiet. Where's your tongue ?

ELIZABETH. I think we've all had quite enough of Millie's tongue, Father. Let her give it a rest if she've a mind.

DANIEL. I warrant she be gone as shy as a May bettel when 'tis daylight. But us'll take it as she have fixed it up in her own mind like. Come, Mother, such a time as this, you won't take no objection to the drawing of a jug of cider.

ELIZABETH. And supper just about to be served ? I'm surprised at you, Father. No, I can't hear of cider being drawn so needless like.

DANIEL. Well, well,—have it your own way—but I always says, and my father used to say it afore I, a fine deed do call for a fine drink, and that's how 'twas in my time.

ELIZABETH. Millie, do you call your cousins in to supper.

DANIEL. Ah, and where be the maids gone off to this time of night, Mother ?

ANDREW. Annet did pass me as I came through the yard, Master——

[MAY, *quietly opens the cupboard door and comes out.*

ELIZABETH. So that's where you've been, you deceitful little wench,

ANDREW. Well, to think of that, Millie.

ELIZABETH. And how long may you have bid there, I should like to know ?

DANIEL. Come, come, my little maid, 'tis early days for you to be getting a lesson in courtship.

MAY. O there wasn't any courtship, Uncle, and I didn't hear nothing at all to speak of.

ELIZABETH. There, run along quick and find your sister. Supper's late already, and that it is.

ANNET. I'll go with her.

[*She starts forward and hurriedly moves towards the door.*

ELIZABETH. Stop a moment, Millie. What are you thinking of to go trailing out in the dew with that beautiful cloak and bonnet. Take and lay them in the box at once, do you hear?

DANIEL. That's it, Mill. 'Twouldn't do for to mess them up afore the day. 'Twas a fair price as I gived for they, and that I can tell you, my girl.

[ANNET *stops irresolutely.* MAY *seizes her hand.*

MAY. Come off, come off, "Cousin Millie"; 'tis not damp outside, and O I'm afeared to cross the rickyard by myself.

[*She pulls* ANNET *violently by the hand and draws her out of the door.*

ELIZABETH. Off with the cloak this minute, Millie.

MAY. [*Calling back.*] She's a-taking of it off, Aunt, she is.

ELIZABETH. I don't know what's come to the maid. She don't act like herself to-day.

DANIEL. Ah, that be asking too much of a maid, to act like herself, and the wedding day close ahead of she.

ELIZABETH. I'd be content with a suitable behaviour, Father. I'm not hard to please.

DANIEL. Ah, you take and let her go quiet, same as I lets th' old mare when her first comes up from grass.

ELIZABETH. 'Tis all very well for you to talk, Father but 'tis I who have got to do.

DANIEL. Come Mother, come Andrew, I be sharp set. And 'tis the feel of victuals and no words as I wants in my mouth.

ELIZABETH. Well, Father, I'm not detaining you. There's the door, and the food has been cooling on the table this great while.

DANIEL. Come you, Andrew, come you, Mother. Us'll make a bit of a marriage feast this night.

[*He leads the way and the others follow him out.*

[*Curtain.*]

ACT II.—Scene 1.

A woodland path. GILES *comes forward with his two servants,* GEORGE *and* JOHN, *who are carrying heavy packets.*

GILES. 'Tis powerful warm to-day. We will take a bit of rest before we go further.

GEORGE. [*Setting down his packet.*] That's it, master, 'Tis a rare weight as I've been carrying across my back since dawn.

JOHN. [*Also setting down his burden.*] Ah, I be pleased for to lay aside yon. 'Tis wonderful heavy work, this journeying to and fro with gold and silver.

GILES. Our travelling is very nigh finished. There lies the road which goes to Camel Farm.

GEORGE. Oh, I count as that must be a rare sort of a place, master.

JOHN. Seeing as us haven't stopped scarce an hour since us landed off the sea.

GEORGE. But have come running all the while same as the fox may run in th' early morning towards the poultry yard.

JOHN. Nor broke bread, nor scarce got a drop of drink to wet th' insides of we.

GILES. 'Tis very little further that you have got to journey, my good lads. We are nigh to the end of our wayfaring.

GEORGE. And what sort of a place be we a-coming to, master?

GILES. 'Tis the place out of all the world to me.

JOHN. I count 'tis sommat rare and fine in that case, seeing as we be come from brave foreign parts, master.

GILES. 'Tis rarer, and finer than all the foreign lands that lie beneath the sun, my lads.

GEORGE. That's good hearing, master. And is the victuals like to be as fine as the place?

GILES. O, you'll fare well enough yonder.

JOHN. I was never one for foreign victuals, nor for the drink that was over there neither.

GILES. Well, the both of you shall rest this night beneath the grandest roof that ever sheltered a man's head. And you shall sit at a table spread as you've not seen this many a year.

GEORGE. That'll be sommat to think on, master, when us gets upon our legs again.

JOHN. I be thinking of it ahead as I lies here, and that's the truth.

[*The two servants stretch themselves comfortably beneath the trees.* GILES *walks restlessly backwards and forwards as though impatient at any delay. From time to time he glances at a ring which he wears, sighing heavily as he does so.*

[*An old man comes up, leaning on his staff.*

OLD MAN. Good-morning to you, my fine gentlemen.

GILES. Good-morning, master.

OLD MAN. 'Tis a wonderful warm sun to-day.

GILES. You're right there, master.

OLD MAN. I warrant as you be journeying towards the same place where I be going, my lord.

GILES. And where is that, old master ?

OLD MAN. Towards Camel Farm.

GILES. You're right. 'Tis there and nowhere else that we are going.

OLD MAN. Ah, us'll have to go smartish if us is to be there in time.

GILES. In time for what, my good man ?

OLD MAN. In time for to see the marrying, my lord.

GILES. The marrying ? What's that you're telling me?

OLD MAN. 'Tis at noon this day that she's to be wed.

GILES. Who are you speaking of, old man ?

OLD MAN. And where is your lordship journeying this day if 'tis not to the marrying ?

GILES. Who's getting wed up yonder, tell me quickly ?

OLD MAN. 'Tis th' old farmer's daughter what's to wed come noon-tide.

GILES. [*Starting.*] Millie! O that is heavy news. [*Looking at his hand.*] Then 'tis as I feared, for since daybreak yesterday the brightness has all gone from out of the seven stones. That's how 'twould be, she told me once.

[*He turns away from the others in deep distress of mind.*

GEORGE. Us'll see no Camel Farm this day.

JOHN. And th' inside of I be crying out for victuals.

OLD MAN. Then you be not of these parts, masters?

GEORGE. No, us be comed from right over the seas, along of master.

JOHN. Ah, 'tis a fine gentleman, master. But powerful misfortunate in things of the heart.

GEORGE. Ah, he'd best have stopped where he was. Camel Farm baint no place for the like of he to go courting at.

JOHN. Ah, master be used to them great palaces, all over gold and marble with windows as you might drive a waggon through, and that you might.

GEORGE. All painted glass. And each chair with golden legs to him, and a sight of silver vessels on the table as never you did dream of after a night's drinking, old man. [GILES *comes slowly towards them.*

GILES. And who is she to wed, old man?

OLD MAN. Be you a-speaking of the young mistress up at Camel Farm, my lord?

GILES. Yes. With whom does she go to church to-day?

OLD MAN. 'Tis along of Master Andrew that her do go. What lives up Cranham way.

GILES. Ah, th'old farmer was always wonderful set on him. [*A pause.*

OLD MAN. I be a poor old wretch what journeys upon the roads, master, and maybe I picks a crust here and gets a drink of water there, and the shelter of the pig-stye wall to rest the bones of me at night time.

GILES. What matters it if you be old and poor, master, so that the heart of you be whole and unbroken ?

OLD MAN. Us poor old wretches don't carry no hearts to th' insides of we. The pains of us do come from the having of no victuals and from the winter's cold when snow do lie on the ground and the wind do moan over the fields, and when the fox do bark.

GILES. What is the pang of hunger and the cold bite of winter set against the cruel torment of a disappointed love ?

OLD MAN. I baint one as can judge of that, my lord, seeing that I be got a poor old badger of a man, and the days when I was young and did carry a heart what could beat with love, be ahind of I, and the feel of them clean forgot.

GILES. Then what do you up yonder at the marrying this morning ?

OLD MAN. Oh, I do take me to those places where there be burying or marriage, for the hearts of folk at these seasons be warmed and kinder, like. And 'tis bread and meat as I gets then. Food be thrown out to the poor old dog what waits patient at the door.

GILES. [*Looks intently at him for a moment.*] See here, old master. I would fain strike a bargain with you. And 'tis with a handful of golden pieces that I will pay your service.

OLD MAN. Anything to oblige you, my young lord.

GILES. [*To* GEORGE.] Take out a handful from the bag of gold. And you, John, give him some of the silver.

[GEORGE *and* JOHN *untie their bags and take out gold and silver. They twist it up in a handkerchief which they give to the old man.*]

OLD MAN. May all the blessings of heaven rest on you, my lord, for 'tis plain to see that you be one of the greatest and finest gentlemen ever born to the land.

GILES. My good friend, you're wrong there, I was a poor country lad, but I had the greatest treasure

that a man could hold on this earth. 'Twas the love of my cousin Millie. And being poor, I was put from out the home, and sent to seek my fortune in parts beyond the sea.

OLD MAN. Now, who'd have thought 'twas so, for the looks of you be gentle born all over.

GILES. "Come back with a bushel of gold in one hand and one of silver in t'other" the old farmer said to me, "and then maybe I'll let you wed my daughter."

OLD MAN. And here you be comed back, and there lie the gold and the silver bags.

GILES. And yonder is Millie given in marriage to another.

GEORGE. 'Taint done yet, master.

JOHN. 'Tisn't too late, by a long way, master.

GILES. [*To* OLD MAN.] And so I would crave something of you, old friend. Lend me your smock, and your big hat and your staff. In that disguise I will go to the farm and look upon my poor false love once more. If I find that her heart is already given to another, I shall not make myself known to her. But if she still holds to her love for me, then——

GEORGE. Go in the fine clothes what you have upon you, master. And even should the maid's heart, be given to another, the sight of so grand a cloth and such laces will soon turn it the right way again.

JOHN. Ah, that's so, it is. You go as you be clothed now, master. I know what maids be, and 'tis finery and good coats which do work more on the hearts of they nor anything else in the wide world.

GILES. No, no, my lads. I will return as I did go from yonder. Poor, and in mean clothing. Nor shall a glint of all my wealth speak one word for me. But if so be as her heart is true in spite of everything, my sorrowful garments will not hide my love away from her.

OLD MAN. [*Taking off his hat.*] Here you are master.

[GILES *hands his own hat to* GEORGE. *He then takes off his coat and gives it to* JOHN. *The* OLD MAN *takes off his smock,* GILES *puts it on.*

OLD MAN. Pull the hat well down about the face of you, master, so as the smooth skin of you be hid.

GILES. [*Turning round in his disguise.*] How's that, my friends ?

GEORGE. You be a sight too straight in the back, master.

GILES. [*Stooping.*] I'll soon better that.

JOHN. Be you a-going in them fine buckled shoes, master ?

GILES. I had forgot the shoes. When I get near to the house 'tis barefoot that I will go.

GEORGE. Then let us be off, master, for the time be running short.

JOHN. Ah, that 'tis. I count it be close on noon-day now by the look of the sun.

OLD MAN. And heaven be with you, my young gentleman.

GILES. My good friends, you shall go with me a little further. And when we have come close upon the farm, you shall stop in the shelter of a wood that I know of and await the signal I shall give you.

GEORGE. And what'll that be, master ?

GILES. I shall blow three times, and loudly from my whistle, here.

JOHN. And be we to come up to the farm when we hears you ?

GILES. As quickly as you can run. 'Twill be the sign that I need all of you with me.

GEORGE *and* JOHN. That's it, master. Us do understand what 'tis as we have got to do.

OLD MAN. Ah, 'tis best to be finished with hearts that beat to the tune of a maid's tongue, and to creep quiet along the roads with naught but them pains as hunger and thirst do bring to th' inside. So 'tis.

[*Curtain.*]

ACT III.—Scene 1.

The parlour at Camel Farm. ELIZABETH, *in her best dress, is moving about the room putting chairs in their places and arranging ornaments on the dresser, etc.* MAY *stands at the door with a large bunch of flowers in her hands.*

ELIZABETH. And what do you want to run about in the garden for when I've just smoothed your hair and got you all ready to go to church?

MAY. I've only been helping Annet gather some flowers to put upon the table.

ELIZABETH. You should know better then. Didn't I tell you to sit still in that chair with your hands folded nicely till we were ready to start.

MAY. Why, I couldn't be sitting there all the while, now could I, Aunt ?

ELIZABETH. This'll be the last time as I tie your ribbon, mind.

[*She smoothes* MAY*'s hair and ties it up for her.* ANNET *comes into the room with more flowers.*

ELIZABETH. What's your cousin doing now, Annet ?

ANNET. The door of her room is still locked, Aunt. And what she says is that she do want to bide alone there

ELIZABETH. In all my days I never did hear tell of such a thing, I don't know what's coming to the world, I don't.

MAY. I count that Millie do like to be all to herself whilst she is a-dressing up grand in her white gown, and the silken cloak and bonnet.

ANNET. Millie's not a-dressing of herself up. I heard her crying pitiful as I was gathering flowers in the garden.

ELIZABETH. Crying ? She'll have something to cry

about if she doesn't look out, when her father comes in, and hears how she's a-going on.

MAY. I wonder why Cousin Millie's taking on like this. I shouldn't, if 'twas me getting married.

ELIZABETH. Look you, May, you get and run up, and knock at the door and tell her that 'twill soon be time for us to set off to church and that she have got to make haste in her dressing.

MAY. I'll run, Aunt, only 'tis very likely as she'll not listen to anything that I say. [MAY *goes out.*

ELIZABETH. Now Annet, no idling here, if you please. Set the nosegay in water, and when you've given a look round to see that everything is in its place, upstairs with you, and on with your bonnet, do you hear? Uncle won't wish to be kept waiting for you, remember.

ANNET. I'm all ready dressed, except for my bonnet, Aunt. 'Tis Millie that's like to keep Uncle waiting this morning. [*She goes out.*

[DANIEL *comes in.*

DANIEL. Well, Mother—well, girls—but, bless my soul, where's Millie got to?

ELIZABETH. Millie has not seen fit to shew herself this morning, Father. She's biding up in her room with the door locked, and nothing that I've been able to say has been attended to, so perhaps you'll kindly have your try.

DANIEL. Bless my soul—where's May? Where's Annet? Send one of the little maids up to her, and tell her 'tis very nigh time for us to be off.

ELIZABETH. I'm fairly tired of sending up to her, Father. You'd best go yourself.

[MAY *comes into the room.*

MAY. Please Aunt, the door, 'tis still locked, and Millie is crying ever so sadly within, and she won't open to me, nor speak, nor nothing.

ELIZABETH. There, Father,—perhaps you'll believe what I tell you another time. Millie has got that hardened and wayward, there's no managing of her, there's not.

DANIEL. Ah, 'twon't be very long as us'll have the managing of she. 'Twill be young Andrew as'll take she in hand after this day.

ELIZABETH. 'Tis all very well to talk of young Andrew, but who's a-going to get her to church with him I'd like to know.

DANIEL. Why, 'tis me as'll do it, to be sure.

ELIZABETH. Very well, Father, and we shall all be much obliged to you.

[DANIEL *goes to the door and shouts up the stairs.*

DANIEL. Well, Millie, my wench. Come you down here. 'Tis time we did set out. Do you hear me, Mill, 'tis time we was off.

[ELIZABETH *waits listening. No answer comes.*

DANIEL. Don't you hear what I be saying, Mill? Come you down at once. [*There is no answer.*

DANIEL. Millie, there be Andrew a-waiting for to take you to church. Come you down this minute.

ELIZABETH. You'd best take sommat and go and break open the door, Father. 'Tis the sensiblest thing as you can do, only you'd never think of anything like that by yourself.

DANIEL. I likes doing things my own way, Mother. Women-folk, they be so buzzing. 'Tis like a lot of insects around of anyone on a summer's day. A-saying this way and that—whilst a man do go at anything quiet and calm-like. [ANNET *comes in.*

ANNET. Please, Uncle, Millie says that she isn't coming down for no one.

DANIEL. [*Roaring in fury.*] What! What's that, my wench—isn't a-coming down for no one? Hear that, Mother, hear that? I'll have sommat to say to that, I will. [*Going to the door.*

DANIEL. [*Roaring up the stairs.*] Hark you, Mill, down you comes this moment else I'll smash the door right in, and that I will.

[DANIEL *comes back into the room, storming violently.*

DANIEL. Ah, 'tis a badly bred up wench is Millie,

and her'd have growed up very different if I'd a-had the bringing up of she. But spoiled she is and spoiled her've always been, and what could anyone look for from a filly what's been broke in by women folk !

ELIZABETH. There, there, Father—there's no need to bluster in this fashion. Take up the poker and go and break into the door quiet and decent, like anyone else would do. And girls—off for your bonnets this moment I tell you.

[*She takes up a poker and hands it to* DANIEL, *who mops his face and goes slowly out and upstairs.* ANNET *and* MAY *leave the room. The farmer is heard banging at the door of Millie's bedroom.*

[ELIZABETH *moves about the room setting it in order.* ANDREW *comes in at the door. He carries a bunch of flowers, which he lays on the table.*

ANDREW. Good-morning to you, mistress.

ELIZABETH. Good-morning, Andrew.

ANDREW. What's going on upstairs ?

ELIZABETH. 'Tis Father at a little bit of carpentering.

ANDREW. I'm come too soon, I reckon.

ELIZABETH We know what young men be upon their wedding morn ! I warrant as the clock can't run too fast for them at such a time.

ANDREW. You're right there, mistress. But the clock have moved powerful slow all these last few weeks—for look you here, 'tis a month this day since I last set eyes on Mill or had a word from her lips—so 'tis.

ELIZABETH. You'll have enough words presently. Hark, she's coming down with Father now.

[ANDREW *turns eagerly towards the door. The farmer enters with* MILLIE *clinging to his arm, she wears her ordinary dress. Her hair is ruffled and in disorder, and she has been crying.*

DANIEL. Andrew, my lad, good morning to you.

ANDREW. Good morning, master.

DANIEL. You mustn't mind a bit of an April shower, my boy. 'Tis the way with all maids on their wedding morn. Isn't that so, Mother ?

ELIZABETH. I wouldn't make such a show of myself if I was you, Mill. Go upstairs this minute and wash your face and smooth your hair and put yourself ready for church.

DANIEL. Nay, she be but just come from upstairs, Mother. Let her bide quiet a while with young Andrew here ; whilst do you come along with me and get me out my Sunday coat. 'Tis time I was dressed for church too, I'm thinking.

ELIZABETH. I don't know what's come to the house this morning, and that's the truth. Andrew, I'll not have you keep Millie beyond a five minutes. 'Tis enough of one another as you'll get later on, like. Father, go you off upstairs for your coat. 'Tis hard work for me, getting you all to act respectable, that 'tis.

[DANIEL *and* ELIZABETH *leave the room.* ANDREW *moves near* MILLIE *and holds out both his hands. She draws herself haughtily away.*

ANDREW. Millie—'tis our wedding day.

MILLIE. And what if it is, Andrew.

ANDREW. Millie, it cuts me to the heart to see your face all wet with tears.

MILLIE. Did you think to see it otherwise, Andrew ?

ANDREW. No smile upon your lips, Millie.

MILLIE. Have I anything to smile about, Andrew ?

ANDREW. No love coming from your eyes, Mill.

MILLIE. That you have never seen, Andrew.

ANDREW. And all changed in the voice of you too.

MILLIE. What do you mean by that, Andrew ?

ANDREW. Listen, Millie—'tis a month since I last spoke with you. Do you recollect ? 'Twas the evening of the great Fair.

MILLIE And what if it was ?

ANDREW. Millie, you were kinder to me that night than ever you had been before. I seemed to see such

a gentle look in your eyes then. And when you spoke, 'twas as though—as though—well—'twas one of they quists a-cooing up in the trees as I was put in mind of.

MILLIE. Well, there's nothing more to be said about that now, Andrew. That night's over and done with.

ANDREW. I've carried the thought of it in my heart all this time, Millie.

MILLIE. I never asked you to, Andrew.

ANDREW. I've brought you a nosegay of flowers, Mill. They be rare blossoms with grand names what I can't recollect to all of them.

[MILLIE *takes the nosegay, looks at it for an instant, and then lets it fall.*

MILLIE. I have no liking for flowers this day, Andrew.

ANDREW. O Millie, and is it so as you and me are going to our marriage ?

MILLIE. Yes, Andrew. 'Tis so. I never said it could be different. I have no heart to give you. My love was given long ago to another. And that other has forgotten me by now.

ANDREW. O Millie, you shall forget him too when once you are wed to me, I promise you.

MILLIE. 'Tis beyond the power of you or any man to make me do that, Andrew.

ANDREW. Millie, what's the good of we two going on to church one with t'other ?

MILLIE. There's no good at all, Andrew.

ANDREW. Millie, I could have sworn that you had begun to care sommat more than ordinary for me that last time we were together.

MILLIE. Then you could have sworn wrong. I care nothing for you, Andrew, no, nothing. But I gave my word I'd go to church with you and be wed. And—I'll not break my word, I'll not.

ANDREW. And is this all that you can say to me to-day, Mill ?

MILLIE. Yes, Andrew, 'tis all. And now, 'tis very late, and I have got to dress myself.

ELIZABETH. [*Calling loudly from above.*] Millie, what are you stopping for ? Come you up here and get your gown on, do.

[MILLIE *looks haughtily at* ANDREW *as she passes him. She goes slowly out of the room.*

[ANDREW *picks up the flowers and stands holding them, looking disconsolately down upon them.* MAY *comes in, furtively.*

MAY. All alone, Andrew ? Has Millie gone to put her fine gown on ?

ANDREW. Yes, Millie's gone to dress herself.

MAY. O that's a beautiful nosegay, Andrew. Was it brought for Mill ?

ANDREW. Yes, May, but she won't have it.

MAY. Millie don't like you very much, Andrew, do she ?

ANDREW. Millie's got quite changed towards me since last time.

MAY. And when was that, Andrew ?

ANDREW. Why, last time was the evening of the Fair, May.

MAY. When I was hid in the cupboard yonder, Andrew ?

ANDREW. So you were, May. Well, can't you recollect how 'twas that she spoke to me then ?

MAY. O yes, Andrew, and that I can. 'Twas a quist a-cooing in the tree one time—and then—she did recollect herself and did sharpen up her tongue and 'twas another sort of bird what could drive its beak into the flesh of anyone—so 'twas.

ANDREW. O May—you say she did recollect herself—what do you mean by those words ?

MAY. You see, she did give her word that she would speak sharp and rough to you.

ANDREW. What are you talking about, May ? Do you mean that the tongue of her was not speaking as the heart of her did feel ?

MAY. I guess 'twas sommat like that, Andrew.

ANDREW. O May, you have gladdened me powerful by these words.

MAY. But, O you must not tell of me, Andrew.

ANDREW. I will never do so, May—only I shall know better how to be patient, and to keep the spirit of me up next time that she do strike out against me.

MAY. I'm not a-talking of Mill, Andrew.

ANDREW. Who are you talking of then, I'd like to know?

MAY. 'Twas Annet.

ANDREW. What was?

MAY. Annet who was dressed up in the cloak and bonnet of Millie that night and who did speak with you so gentle and nice.

ANDREW. Annet!

ELIZABETH. [*Is heard calling.*] There, father, come along down and give your face a wash at the pump.

MAY. Let's go quick together into the garden, Andrew, and I'll tell you all about it and how 'twas that Annet acted so.

[*She seizes* ANDREW'S *hand and pulls him out of the room with her.*

[*Curtain.*]

ACT III.—Scene 2.

A few minutes later.

ELIZABETH *stands tying her bonnet strings before a small mirror on the wall.* DANIEL *is mopping his face with a big, bright handkerchief.* ANNET, *dressed for church, is by the table. She sadly takes up the nosegay of flowers which* ANDREW *brought for* MILLIE, *and moves her hand caressingly over it.*

ELIZABETH. If you think that your neckerchief is put on right 'tis time you should know different, Father.

DANIEL. What's wrong with it then, I'd like to know?

ELIZABETH. 'Tis altogether wrong. 'Tis like the two ears of a heifer sticking out more than anything else that I can think on.

DANIEL. Have it your own way, Mother—and fix it as you like.

[*He stands before her and she rearranges it.*

ANNET. These flowers were lying on the ground.

ELIZABETH. Thrown there in a fine fit of temper, I warrant.

DANIEL. Her was as quiet as a new born lamb once the door was broke open and she did see as my word, well, 'twas my word.

ELIZABETH. We all hear a great deal about your word, Father, but 'twould be better for there to be more do and less say about you.

DANIEL. [*Going over to Annet and looking at her intently.*] Why, my wench—what be you a-dropping tears for this day?

ANNET. [*Drying her eyes.*] 'Twas—'twas the scent out of one of the flowers as got to my eyes, Uncle.

DANIEL. Well, that's a likely tale it is. Hear that, Mother? 'Tis with her eyes that this little wench do snuff at a flower. That's good, bain't it?

ELIZABETH. I haven't patience with the wenches now-a-days. Lay down that nosegay at once, Annet, and call your cousin from her room. I warrant she has finished tricking of herself up by now.

DANIEL. Ah, I warrant as her'll need a smartish bit of time for to take the creases out of the face of she.

[ANDREW *and* MAY *come in.*]

DANIEL. Well, Andrew, my lad, 'tis about time as we was on the way to church I reckon.

ANDREW. I count as 'tis full early yet, master.

[*He takes up the nosegay from the table and crosses the room to the window where* ANNET *is standing, and trying to control her tears.*

ANDREW. Annet, Millie will have none of my

blossoms. I should like it well if you would carry them in your hand to church this day.

ANNET. [*Looking wonderingly at him.*] Me, Andrew ?

ANDREW. Yes, you, Annet. For, look you, they become you well. They have sommat of the sweetness of you in them. And the touch of them is soft and gentle. And—I would like you to keep them in your hands this day, Annet.

ANNET. O Andrew, I never was given anything like this before.

ANDREW. [*Slowly.*] I should like to give you a great deal more, Annet—only I cannot. And 'tis got too late.

ELIZABETH. Too late—I should think it was. What's come to the maid ! In my time girls didn't use to spend a quarter of the while afore the glass as they do now. Suppose you was to holler for her again, Father.

DANIEL. Anything to please you, Mother—

MAY. I hear her coming, Uncle. I hear the noise of the silk.

[MILLIE *comes slowly into the room in her wedding clothes. She holds herself very upright and looks from one to another quietly and coldly.*

MAY. Andrew's gived your nosegay to Annet, Millie.

MILLIE. 'Twould have been a pity to have wasted the fresh blossoms.

MAY. But they were gathered for you, Mill.

MILLIE. Annet seems to like them better than I did.

DANIEL. Well, my wench—you be tricked out as though you was off to the horse show. Mother, there bain't no one as can beat our wench in looks anywhere this side of the country.

ELIZABETH. She's right enough in the clothing of her, but 'twould be better if her looks did match the garments more. Come, Millie, can't you appear pleasanter like on your wedding day ?

MILLIE. I'm very thirsty, Mother. Could I have a drink of water before we set out ?

ELIZABETH. And what next, I should like to know ?

MILLIE. 'Tis only a drink of water that I'm asking for.

DANIEL. Well, that's reasonable, Mother, bain't it ?

ELIZABETH. Run along and get some for your cousin, May. [MAY *runs out of the room.*

DANIEL. Come you here, Andrew, did you ever see a wench to beat ourn in looks, I say ?

ANDREW. [*Who has remained near* ANNET *without moving.*] 'Tis very fine that Millie's looking.

DANIEL. Fine, I should think 'twas. You was a fine looking wench, Mother, the day I took you to church, but 'tis my belief that Millie have beat you in the appearance of her same as the roan heifer did beat th' old cow when the both was took along to market. Ah, and did fetch very near the double of what I gived for the dam.

[MAY *returns carrying a glass bowl full of water.*

MAY. Here's a drink of cold water, Millie. I took it from the spring.

[MILLIE *takes the bowl. At the same moment a loud knocking is heard at the outside door.*

ELIZABETH. Who's that, I should like to know ?

[MILLIE *sets down the bowl on the table. She listens with a sudden intent, anxiety on her face as the knock is repeated.*

DANIEL. I'll learn anyone to come meddling with me on a day when 'tis marrying going on.

[*The knocking is again heard.*

MILLIE. [*To* MAY, *who would have opened the door.*] No, no. 'Tis I who will open the door.

[*She raises the latch and flings the door wide open.* GILES *disguised as a poor and bent old man, comes painfully into the room.*

ELIZABETH. We don't want no beggars nor roadsters here to-day, if you please.

DANIEL. Ah, and that us don't. Us be a wedding party here, and 'tis for you to get moving on, old man.

MILLIE. He is poor and old. And he has wandered far, in the heat of the morning. Look at his sad clothing.

ANDREW. [*To* ANNET.] I never heard her put so much gentleness to her words afore.

MILLIE. And 'tis my wedding day. He shall not go uncomforted from here.

ELIZABETH. I never knowed you so careful of a poor wretch afore, Millie. 'Tis quite a new set out, this.

MILLIE. I am in mind of another, who may be wandering, and hungered, and in poor clothing this day.

MAY. Give him something quick, Aunt, and let him get off so that we can start for the wedding.

MILLIE. [*Coming close to* GILES.] What is it I can do for you, master ?

GILES. 'Tis only a drink of water that I ask, mistress.

MILLIE. [*Taking up the glass bowl.*] Only a drink of water, master ? Then take, and be comforted.

[*She holds the bowl before him for him to drink. As he takes it, he drops a ring into the water. He then drinks and hands the bowl back to* MILLIE. *For a moment she gazes speechless at the bottom of the bowl. Then she lifts the ring from it and would drop the bowl but for* MAY, *who takes it from her.*

MILLIE. Master, from whom did you get this ?

GILES. Look well at the stones of it, mistress, for they are clouded and dim.

MILLIE. And not more clouded than the heart which is in me, master. O do you bring me news ?

GILES. Is it not all too late for news, mistress ?

MILLIE. Not if it be the news for which my heart craves, master.

GILES. And what would that be, mistress ?

[MILLIE *goes to* GILES, *and with both hands slowly pushes back his big hat and gazes at him.*

MILLIE. O Giles, my true love. You are come just in time. Another hour and I should have been wed.

GILES. And so you knew me, Mill ?

MILLIE. O Giles, no change of any sort could hide you from the eyes of my love.

GILES. Your love, Millie. And is that still mine ?

MILLIE. It always has been yours, Giles. O I will go with you so gladly in poor clothing and in hunger all over the face of the earth.

[*She goes to him and clasps his arm ; and, standing by his side, faces all those in the room.*

ELIZABETH. [*Angrily.*] Please to come to your right senses, Millie.

DANIEL. Come, Andrew, set your foot down as I've set mine.

ANDREW. Nay, master. There's naught left for me to say. The heart does shew us better nor all words which way we have to travel.

MAY. And are you going to marry a beggar man instead of Andrew, who looks so brave and fine in his wedding clothes, Millie ?

MILLIE. I am going to marry him I have always loved, May—and—O Andrew, I never bore you malice, though I did say cruel and hard words to you sometimes. —But you'll not remember me always—you will find gladness too, some day.

ANDREW. I count as I shall, Millie.

DANIEL. Come, come, I'll have none of this—my daughter wed to a beggar off the highway ! Mother, 'tis time you had a word here.

ELIZABETH. No, Father, I'll leave you to manage this affair. 'Tis you who have spoiled Mill and brought her up so wayward and unruly, and 'tis to you I look for to get us out of this unpleasant position.

MAY. Dear Millie—don't wed my brother Giles. Why, look at his ragged smock and his bare feet.

MILLIE. I shall be proud to go bare too, so long as I am by his side, May.

[GILES *goes to the door and blows his whistle three times and loudly.*

MAY. What's that for, Giles ?

GILES. You shall soon see, little May.

DANIEL. I'll be hanged if I'll stand any more of this

caddling nonsense. Here, Mill—the trap's come to the door. Into it with you, I say.

GILES. I beg you to wait a moment, master.

DANIEL. Wait!—'Tis a sight too long as we have waited this day. If all had been as I'd planned, we should have been to church by now. But womenfolk, there be no depending on they. No, and that there bain't.

[GEORGE, JOHN *and the* OLD MAN *come up.* GEORGE *and* JOHN *carry their packets and the* OLD MAN *has* GILES' *coat and hat over his arm.*

ELIZABETH. And who are these persons, Giles?

[GEORGE *and* JOHN *set down their burdens on the floor and begin to mop their faces. The* OLD MAN *stretches out his fine coat and hat and buckled shoes to* GILES.

OLD MAN. Here they be, my lord, and I warrant as you'll feel more homely like in they, nor what you've got upon you now. [GILES *takes the things from him.*

GILES. Thank you, old master. [*He turns to* MILLIE.] Let me go into the other room, Millie. I will not keep you waiting longer than a few moments.

[*He goes out.*

ELIZABETH. [*To* GEORGE.] And who may you be, I should like to know? You appear to be making very free with my parlour.

GEORGE. We be the servants what wait upon Master Giles, old Missis.

ELIZABETH. Old Missis, indeed. Father, you shall speak to these persons.

DANIEL. Well, my men. I scarce do know whether I be a-standing on my head or upon my heels, and that's the truth 'tis.

GEORGE. Ah, and that I can well understand, master, for I'm a married man myself, and my woman has a tongue to her head very similar to that of th' old missis yonder—so I know what 'tis.

ELIZABETH. Put them both out of the door, Father,

do you hear me? 'Tis to the cider as they've been getting. That's clear.

MILLIE. My good friends, what is it that you carry in those bundles there?

GEORGE. 'Tis gold in mine.

JOHN. And silver here.

ELIZABETH. Depend upon it 'tis two wicked thieves we have got among us, flying from justice.

MILLIE. No, no—did not you hear them say, their master is Giles.

GEORGE. And a better master never trod the earth.

JOHN. And a finer or a richer gentleman I never want to see.

ELIZABETH. Do you hear that, Father? O you shocking liars—'tis stolen goods that you've been and brought to our innocent house this day. But, Father, do you up and fetch in the constable, do you hear?

MAY. O I'll run. I shall love to see them going off to gaol.

MILLIE. Be quiet, May. Can't you all see how 'tis. Giles has done the cruel hard task set him by Father—and is back again with the bushel of silver and that of gold to claim my hand. [GILES *enters*.] But Giles—I'd have given it to you had you come to me poor and forlorn and ragged, for my love has never wandered from you in all this long time.

ANDREW. No, Giles—and that it has not. Millie has never given me one kind word nor one gentle look all the years that I've been courting of her, and that's the truth. And you can call witness to it if you care.

GILES. Uncle, Aunt, I've done the task you set me years ago—and now I claim my reward. I went from this house a poor wretch, with nothing but the hopeless love in my heart to feed and sustain me. I have returned with all that the world can give me of riches and prosperity. Will you now let me be the husband of your daughter?

MAY. O say yes, Uncle, for look how fine and grand

he is in his coat—and the bags are stuffed full to the brim and 'tis with gold and silver.

ELIZABETH. Well—'tis a respectabler end than I thought as you'd come to, Giles. And different nor what you deserved.

DANIEL. Come, come, Mother.—The fewer words to this, the better. Giles, my boy—get you into the trap and take her along to the church and drive smart.

ANDREW. Annet—will you come there with me too?

ANNET. O Andrew—what are you saying?

DANIEL. Come, come. Where's the wind blowing from now? Here, Mother, do you listen to this.

ELIZABETH. I shall be deaf before I've done, but it appears to me that Annet's not lost any time in making the most of her chances.

DANIEL. Ah, and she be none the worse for that. 'Tis what we all likes to do. Where'd I be in the market if I did let my chances blow by me? Hear that, Andrew?

ANDREW. I'm a rare lucky man this day, farmer.

DANIEL. Ah, and 'tis a rare good little wench, Annet—though she bain't so showy as our'n. A rare good little maid. And now 'tis time we was all off to church, seeing as this is to be a case of double harness like.

MAY. O Annet, you can't be wed in that plain gown.

ANNET. May, I'm so happy that I feel as though I were clothed all over with jewels.

ANDREW. Give me your hand, Annet.

MAY. [*Mockingly.*] Millie—don't you want to give a drink of water to yon poor old man?

MILLIE. That I will, May? Here—fetch me something that's better than water for him.

ELIZABETH. I'll have no cider drinking out of meal times here.

MILLIE. Then 'twill have to be when we come back from church.

OLD MAN. Bless you, my pretty lady, but I be used to waiting. I'll just sit me down outside in the sun till you be man and wife.

ELIZABETH And that'll not be till this day next year if this sort of thing goes on any longer.

DANIEL. That's right, Mother. You take and lead the way. 'Tis the womenfolk as do keep we back from everything. But I knows how to settle with they—[*roaring*]—come Mill, come Giles, Andrew, Annet, May. Come Mother, out of th' house with all of you and to church, I say.

[*He gets behind them all and drives them before him and out of the room. When they have gone, the* OLD MAN *sinks on a bench in the door-way.*

OLD MAN. I'm done with all the foolishness of life and I can sit me down and sleep till it be time to eat.

[*Curtain.*]

BUSHES AND BRIARS

CHARACTERS

THOMAS SPRING, *a farmer, aged* 35.

EMILY, *his wife, the same age.*

CLARA, *his sister, aged* 21.

JESSIE AND ROBIN, *the children of Thomas and Emily, aged* 10 *and* 8.

JOAN, *maid to Clara.*

MILES HOOPER, *a rich draper.*

LUKE JENNER, *a farmer.*

LORD LOVEL.

GEORGE, *aged* 28.

BUSHES AND BRIARS.

ACT I.—Scene 1.

A wood. It is a morning in June.

GEORGE, *carrying an empty basket, comes slowly through the wood. On reaching a fallen tree he sits down on it, placing his basket on the ground. With his stick he absently moves the grass and leaves that lie before him, and is so deeply lost in his own thoughts that he does not hear the approach of* MILES *and* LUKE *until they are by his side.*

MILES. Here's the very man to tell us all we want to know.

LUKE. Why, if 'tisn't George from Ox Lease.

[GEORGE *half rises.*

MILES. No, sit you down again, my lad, and we'll rest awhile by the side of you.

LUKE. That's it, Miles. Nothing couldn't have fallen out better for us, I'm thinking.

MILES. You're about right, Luke. Now, George, my man, we should very much appreciate a few words with you.

GEORGE. [*Taking up his basket.*] Morning baint the time for words, masters. I count as words will keep till the set of sun. 'Tis otherwise with work.

MILES. Work, why, George, 'tis clear you are come out but to gather flowers this morning.

LUKE. 'Tis the very first time as ever I caught George an idling away of his time like this.

GEORGE. 'Tis over to Brook as I be going, masters, to fetch back a couple of young chicken. Ourn be mostly old fowls, or pullets what do lay.

LUKE. I never heard tell of young chicken being ate up at Ox Lease afore July was in.

GEORGE. Nor me neither, master. Never heared nor seed such a thing. But mistress, her says, you can't sit a maid from town at table unless there be poultry afore of she. They be rare nesh in their feeding, maids from town, so mistress do say.

MILES. That just brings us to our little matter, George. When is it that you expect the young lady ?

GEORGE. The boxes of they be stacked mountains high in the bedroom since yesterday. And I count as the maids will presently come on their own feet from where the morning coach do set them down.

LUKE. Nay, but there's only one maid what's expected.

GEORGE. Miss Clara, what's master's sister ; and the serving wench of she.

MILES. Well, George, 'twas a great day for your master when old Madam Lovel took little Miss Clara to be bred up as one of the quality.

GEORGE. A water plant do grow best by the stream, and a blossom from the meadows, midst the grass. Let each sort bide in the place where 'twas seeded.

MILES. No, no, George, you don't know what you're talking about. A little country wench may bloom into something very modish and elegant, once taken from her humble home and set amongst carpets of velvet and curtains of satin. You'll see.

GEORGE. 'Twould be a poor thing for any one to be so worked upon by curtains, nor yet carpets, master.

MILES. Take my word for it, George, Ox Lease will have to smarten up a bit for this young lady. I know the circles she has been moving in, and 'tis to the best of everything that she has been used.

GEORGE. [*Rising.*] That's what mistress do say. And that's why I be sent along down to Brook with

haymaking going on and all. Spring chicken with sparrow grass be the right feeding for such as they. So mistress do count.

MILES. Stop a moment, George. You have perhaps heard the letters from Miss Clara discussed in the family from time to time.

GEORGE. Miss Clara did never send but two letters home in all the while she was gone. The first of them did tell as how th' old lady was dead and had left all of her fortune to Miss Clara. And the second was to say as how her was coming back to the farm this morning.

LUKE. And hark you here, George, was naught mentioned about Miss Clara's fine suitors in neither of them letters ?

GEORGE. That I cannot say, Master Jenner.

MILES. Nothing of their swarming thick around her up in London, George ?

GEORGE. They may be swarming by the thousand for aught as I do know. They smells gold as honey bees do smell the blossom. Us'll have a good few of them a-buzzing round the farm afore we're many hours older, so I counts.

MILES. Well, George, that'll liven up the place a bit, I don't doubt.

LUKE. 'Tis a bit of quiet and no livening as Ox Lease do want. Isn't that so, George, my lad ?

GEORGE. [*Preparing to set off.*] I'll say good morning to you, masters. I count I've been and wasted a smartish time already on the road. We be a bit hard pressed up at the farm this day.

MILES. But George, my man, we have a good many questions to ask of you before you set off.

GEORGE. Them questions will have to bide till another time, I reckon. I'm got late already, master.

[*He hurries off.*

MILES. Arriving by the morning coach ! I shall certainly make my call to the farm before sunset. What do you say, Jenner ?

LUKE. You're a rich man, Miles, and I am poor. But we have always been friends.

MILES. And our fathers before us, Luke.

LUKE. And the courting of the same maid shall not come between us.

MILES. [*Slowly.*] That'll be all right, Luke.

LUKE. What I do say is, let's start fair. Neck to neck, like.

MILES. As you please, my good Luke.

LUKE. Then, do you tell me honest, shall I do in the clothes I'm a-wearing of now, Miles ?

MILES. [*Regarding him critically.*] That neckerchief is not quite the thing, Luke.

LUKE. 'Tis my Sunday best.

MILES. Step over to the High Street with me, my lad. I've got something in the shop that will be the very thing. You shall have it half price for 'tis only a bit damaged in one of the corners.

LUKE. I'm sure I'm very much obliged to you, Miles.

MILES. That's all right, Luke.

LUKE. George would look better to my thinking if there was a new coat to the back of him.

MILES. Ah, poor beggar, he would, and no mistake.

LUKE. I warrant as Emily do keep it afore him as how he was took in from off the road by th' old farmer in his day.

MILES. I flatter myself that I have a certain way with the ladies. They come to me confidential like and I tell them what's what, and how that, this or t'other is worn about town. But with Missis Spring 'tis different. That's a woman I could never get the right side of no how.

LUKE. Ah, poor Thomas ! There's a man who goes down trod and hen scratched if you like.

MILES. 'Tis altogether a very poor place up at Ox Lease, for young Miss.

LUKE. (*Pulling out his watch.*] Time's slipping on.

What if we were to stroll on to the shop and see about my neckerchief, Miles ?

MILES. I'm sure I'm quite agreeable, Luke. 'Twill help to pass away the morning.

[*He puts his arm in* LUKE'S *and they go briskly off in the direction of the village.*

ACT I.—Scene 2.

CLARA, *followed by* JOAN, *comes through the wood.* CLARA *is dressed in a long, rich cloak and wears a bonnet that is brightly trimmed with feathers and ribbons.* JOAN *wears a cotton bonnet and small shawl. She carries her mistress's silken bag over her arm.*

CLARA. [*Pointing to the fallen tree.*] There is the very resting place for us. We will sit down under the trees for a while. [*She seats herself.*

JOAN. [*Dusting the tree with her handkerchief before she sits on it.*] Have we much further to go, mistress ?

CLARA. Only a mile or two, so far as I can remember.

JOAN. 'Tis rough work for the feet, down in these parts, mistress.

CLARA. If London roads were paved with diamonds I'd sooner have my feet treading this rugged way that leads to home.

JOAN. What sort of a place shall we find it when we gets there, mistress.

CLARA. I was but seven when I left them all, Joan. And that is fourteen years ago to-day.

JOAN. So many years may bring about some powerful big changes, mistress.

CLARA. But I dream that I shall find all just as it

was when I went away. Only that Gran'ma won't be there.

[*There is a short silence during which* CLARA *seems lost in thought.* JOAN *flicks the dust off her shoes with a branch of leaves.*

JOAN. 'Tis the coaches I do miss down in these parts.

CLARA. I would not have driven one step of the way this morning, Joan. In my fancy I have been walking up from the village and through the wood and over the meadows since many a day. I have not forgotten one turn of the path.

JOAN. The road has not changed then, mistress ?

CLARA. No. But it does not seem quite so broad or so fine as I remembered it to be. That is all.

JOAN. And very likely the house won't seem so fine neither, mistress, after the grand rooms which you have been used to.

JOAN. What company shall we see there, mistress ?

CLARA. Well, there's Thomas, he is my brother, and Emily his wife. Then the two children.

CLARA. [*After a short silence, and as though to herself.*] And there was George.

JOAN. Yes, mistress ?

CLARA. Georgie seemed so big and tall to me in those days. I wonder how old he really was, when I was seven.

JOAN. Would that be a younger brother of yours, like, mistress ?

CLARA. No, George minded the horses and looked after the cows and poultry. Sometimes he would drive me into market with him on a Saturday. And in the evenings I would follow him down to the pool to see the cattle watered.

JOAN. I'm mortal afeared of cows, mistress. I could never abide the sight nor the sound of those animals.

CLARA. You'll soon get over that, Joan.

JOAN. And I don't care for poultry neither, very much. I goes full of fear when I hears one of they old turkey cocks stamping about.

CLARA. [*Pulling up the sleeve of her left arm.*] There, do you see this little scar? I was helping George to feed the ducks and geese when the fierce gander ran after me and knocked me down and took a piece right out of my arm.

JOAN. [*Looking intently on the scar.*] I have often seen that there mark, mistress. And do you think as that old gander will be living along of the poultry still?

CLARA. I wish he might be, Joan.

JOAN. What with the cows and the horses and the ganders, we shall go with our lives in our hands, as you might say.

CLARA. [*As though to herself.*] When the days got colder, we would sit under the straw rick, George and I. And he would sing to me. Some of his songs, I could say off by heart this day.

JOAN. [*Looking nervously upward.*] O do look at that nasty little thing dropping down upon us from a piece of thread silk. Who ever put such a thing up in the tree I'd like to know.

CLARA. [*Brushing it gently aside.*] That won't hurt you—a tiny caterpillar.

JOAN. [*After a moment.*] What more could the farm hand do, mistress?

CLARA. He would clasp on his bells and dance in the Morris on certain days, Joan.

JOAN. 'Tis to be hoped as there'll be some dancing or something to liven us all up a bit down here.

CLARA. Why, Joan, I believe you're tired already of the country.

JOAN. 'Tis so powerful quiet and heavy like, mistress.

CLARA. 'Tis full of sounds. Listen to the doves in the trees and the lambs calling from the meadow.

JOAN. I'd sooner have the wheels of the coaches and the cries upon the street, and the door bell a ringing every moment and fine gentlemen and ladies being shewn up into the parlour.

CLARA. [*Stretching out her arms.*] O how glad I

am to be free of all that. And most of all, how glad to be ridded of one person.

JOAN. His lordship will perhaps follow us down here, mistress.

CLARA. No, I have forbidden it. I must have a month of quiet, and he is to wait that time for his answer.

JOAN. O mistress, you'll never disappoint so fine a gentleman.

CLARA. You forget that Lord Lovel and I have played together as children. It is as a brother that I look upon him.

JOAN. His lordship don't look upon you as a sister, mistress.

CLARA. [*Rising.*] That is a pity, Joan. But see, it is getting late and we must be moving onwards.

[JOAN *rises and smoothes and shakes out her skirt.*

CLARA. Here, loosen my cloak, Joan, and untie the ribbons of my bonnet.

JOAN. O mistress, keep the pretty clothes upon you till you have got to the house.

CLARA. No, no—such town garments are not suited to the woods and meadows. I want to feel the country breeze upon my head, and my limbs must be free from the weight of the cloak. I had these things upon me during the coach journey. They are filled with road dust and I dislike them now.

JOAN. [*Unfastening the cloak and untying the bonnet.*] They are fresh and bright for I brushed and shook them myself this morning.

CLARA. [*Retying a blue ribbon which she wears in her hair.*] I have taken a dislike to them. See here, Joan, since you admire them, they shall be yours.

JOAN. Mine? The French bonnet and the satin cloak?

CLARA. To comfort you for the pains of the country, Joan.

JOAN. O mistress, let us stop a moment longer

in this quiet place so that I may slip them on and see how they become me.

CLARA. As you will. Listen, that is the cuckoo singing.

JOAN. [*Throwing off her cotton bonnet and shawl and dressing herself hastily in the bonnet and cloak.*] O what must it feel like to be a grand lady and wear such things from dawn to bed time.

CLARA. I am very glad to be without them for a while. How good the air feels on my head.

JOAN. There, mistress, how do I look ?

CLARA. Very nicely, Joan. So nicely that if you like, you may keep them upon you for the remainder of the way.

JOAN. O mistress, may I really do so ?

CLARA. Yes. And Joan, do you go onwards to the farm by the quickest path which is through this wood and across the high road. Anyone will shew you where the place is. I have a mind to wander about in some of the meadows which I remember. But I will join you all in good time.

JOAN. Very well, mistress. If I set off in a few moments it will do, I suppose ? I should just like to take a peep at myself as I am now, in the little glass which you carry in your silk bag.

CLARA. [*Going off.*] Don't spend too much time looking at what will be shewn you, Joan.

JOAN. Never fear, mistress. I'll be there afore you, if I have to run all the way. [CLARA *wanders off.*

[JOAN *sits down again on the trunk of the fallen tree. She opens the silken bag, draws out a small hand glass and looks long and steadily at her own reflection. Then she glances furtively around and, seeing that she is quite alone, she takes a small powder box from the bag and hastily opening it, she gives her face several hurried touches with the powder puff.*

JOAN. [*Surveying the effect in the glass.*] Just to

take off the brown of my freckles. Now if any one was to come upon me sitting here they wouldn't know as I was other than a real, high lady. All covered with this nice cloak as I be, the French bonnet on my head, and powder to my face, who's to tell the difference? But O—these must be hid first.

[*She perceives her cotton bonnet and little shawl on the ground. She hastily rolls them up in a small bundle and stuffs them into the silken bag. Then she takes up the glass and surveys herself again.*

JOAN. How should I act now if some grand gentleman was to come up and commence talking to me? Perhaps he might even take me for a lady of title in these fine clothes, and 'twould be a pity to have to undeceive him.

[*She arranges her hair a little under the bonnet and then lowers the lace veil over her face.*

[MILES *and* LUKE *come slowly up behind her.* MILES *nudges* LUKE *with his elbow, signing to him to remain where he is whilst he steps forward in front of* JOAN.

MILES. Pardon me, madam, but you appear to have mistook the way. Allow me to set you on the right path for Ox Lease.

JOAN. [*Letting the mirror fall on her lap and speaking very low.*] How do you know I am going to Ox Lease, sir?

MILES You see, madam, I happen to know that a stylish young miss from town is expected there to-day.

LUKE. [*Coming forward and speaking in a loud whisper.*] Now Miles. I count as you made one of the biggest blunders of the time. Our young lady be journeying along of her servant wench. This one baint she.

MILES. If we have made a small error, madam, allow me to beg your pardon.

JOAN. Don't mention it, sir. Everyone is mistaken sometimes.

LUKE. Well, I'm powerful sorry if we have given any offence, mam.

JOAN. [*Looking up at* LUKE *with sudden boldness and speaking in a slow, affected voice.*] There's nothing to make so much trouble about, sir.

MILES. Can we be of any assistance to you, madam? The wood may appear rather dense at this point.

JOAN. That it does. Dense and dark—and the pathway! My goodness, but my feet have never travelled over such rough ground before.

MILES. That I am sure of, madam. I have no doubt that the delicate texture of your shoes has been sadly treated by our stones and ruts.

JOAN. [*Insensibly pulling her skirts over her thick walking shoes.*] Well, it's vastly different to London streets, where I generally take exercise—at least when I'm not a-riding in the coach.

MILES. The country is but a sad place at the best, Miss Clara Spring.

JOAN. [*Looking round furtively and speaking in a whisper.*] O, how did you guess my—my name?

LUKE. Come, 'twasn't a hard matter, that.

MILES. Missey can command my services.

JOAN. [*Rallying, and standing up.*] Then gentlemen, do you walk a bit of the road with me and we could enjoy some conversation as we go along.

LUKE. [*Offering his arm.*] You take my arm, Miss Clara—do—.

MILES. [*Also offering his arm.*] I shall also give myself the pleasure of supporting Miss.

JOAN. [*Taking an arm of each.*] O thank you, kindly gentlemen. Now we shall journey very comfortably, I am sure.

[*They all set out walking in the direction of the farm.*

ACT II.—Scene 1.

The kitchen of Ox Lease Farm. There are three doors. One opens to the staircase, one to the garden and a third into the back kitchen. At a table in the middle of the room EMILY *stands ironing some net window curtains.* JESSIE *and* ROBIN *lean against the table watching her. By the open doorway, looking out on the garden, stands* THOMAS, *a mug of cider in one hand and a large slice of bread in the other. As he talks, he takes alternate drinks and bites.*

EMILY. [*Speaking in a shrill, angry voice.*] Now Thomas, suppose you was to take that there bread a step further away and eat it in the garden, if eat it you must, instead of crumbling it all over my clean floor.

THOMAS. Don't you be so testy, Emily. The dogs'll lick the crumbs up as clean as you like presently.

EMILY. Dogs ? I'd like to see the dog as'll shew its nose in here to-day when I've got it all cleaned up against the coming of fine young madam.

THOMAS. [*Finishing his bread and looking wistfully at his empty hand.*] The little maid'll take a brush and sweep up her daddy's crumbs, now, won't her ?

EMILY. I'll give it to any one who goes meddling in my brush cupboard now that I've just put all in order against the prying and nozzling of the good-for-nothing baggage what's coming along with your sister.

ROBIN. What's baggage, Mother ?

EMILY. [*Sharply.*] Never you mind. Get and take your elbow off my ironing sheet.

JESSIE. [*Looking at her father.*] I count as you'd like a piece more bread, Dad ?

THOMAS. Well, I don't say but 'twouldn't come amiss. 'Tis hungry work in th' hayfield. And us be to go without our dinners this day, isn't that so, Emily ?

EMILY. [*Slamming down her iron on the stand.*] If I've told you once, I've told you twenty times, 'twas but

the one pair of hands as I was gived at birth. Now, what have you got to say against that, Thomas ?

THOMAS. [*Sheepishly.*] I'm sure I don't know.

EMILY. And if so be as I'm to clean and wash and cook, and run, and wait, and scour, and mend, for them lazy London minxes, other folk must go without hot cooking at mid-day.

THOMAS. [*Faintly.*] 'Twasn't nothing cooked, like. 'Twas a bit of bread as I did ask for.

JESSIE. [*Getting up.*] I'll get it for you, Dad. I know where the loaf bides and the knife too. I'll cut you, O such a large piece.

EMILY. [*Seizing her roughly by the hand.*] You'll do nothing of the sort. You'll take this here cold iron into Maggie and you'll bring back one that is hot. How am I to get these curtains finished and hung and all, by the time the dressed up parrots come sailing in, I'd like to know.

[JESSIE *runs away with the iron.*

THOMAS. [*Setting down his mug and coming to the table.*] I'd leave the windows bare if it was me, Emily. The creeping rose do form the suitablest shade for they, to my thinking.

EMILY. That shews how much you know about it, Thomas. No, take your hands from off my table. Do you think as I wants dirty thumbs shewing all over the clean net what I've washed and dried and ironed, and been a-messing about with since 'twas light ?

THOMAS. Now that's what I be trying for to say. There's no need for you to go and work yourself into the fidgets, Emily, because of little Clara coming back. Home's home. And 'twon't be neither the curtains nor the hot dinner as Clara will be thinking of when her steps into th' old place once more.

JESSIE. [*Running back with the hot iron which she sets down on the table.*] What will Aunt Clara be thinking of then, Dad ?

THOMAS. [*Shy and abashed under a withering glance from* EMILY *who has taken up the iron and is slamming*

it *down on the net.*] Her'll remember, very like, how 'twas when her left—some fourteen year ago. And her'll have her eyes on Gran'ma's chair, what's empty.

ROBIN. I should be thinking of the hot fowl and sparrow grass what's for dinner.

THOMAS. And her'll look up to th' old clock, and different things what's still in their places. The grand parts where she have been bred up will be forgot. 'Twill be only home as her'll think on.

EMILY. I haven't patience to listen to such stuff.

THOMAS. [*After a pause.*] I count that 'tisn't likely as a young woman what's been left riches as Clara have, would choose to make her home along of such as we for always, like.

EMILY. We have perches and plenty of them for barn door poultry, but when it comes to roosting spangled plumes and fancy fowls, no thank you, Thomas, I'm not going to do it.

ROBIN. Do let us get and roost some fancy fowls, Mother.

JESSIE. What are spangled plumes, Mother?

EMILY. [*Viciously.*] You'll see plenty of them presently.

ROBIN. Will Aunt Clara bring the fowls along of she?

[*A slight pause during which* EMILY *irons vigorously.*

EMILY. [*As she irons.*] Some folk have all the honey. It do trickle from the mouths of them and down to the ground.

ROBIN. Has Aunt Clara got her mouth very sticky, then?

EMILY. And there be others what are born to naught but crusts and the vinegar.

JESSIE. Like you, Mother—Least, that's what Maggie said this morning.

EMILY. What's that?

JESSIE. That 'twas in the vinegar jar as your tongue had growed, Mother.

EMILY. I'll learn that wench to keep her thoughts to herself if she can't fetch them out respectful like. [*Shouting.*] Mag, come you here this minute—what are you after now, I'd like to know, you ugly, idle piece of mischief?

[MAGGIE, *wiping a plate comes from the back kitchen.*

MAGGIE. Was you calling, mistress?

EMILY. What's this you've got saying to Miss Jessie, I should like to know.

JESSIE. [*Running to* MAGGIE *and laying her hand on her arm.*] Dear Maggie, 'tis only what you did tell about poor mother's tongue being in the vinegar jar.

MAGGIE. O Miss Jessie.

EMILY. Hark you here, my girl—if 'twasn't hay time you should bundle up your rags and off with you this minute. But as 'tis awkward being short of a pair of hands just now, you'll bide a week or two and then you'll get outside of my door with no more character to you nor what I took you with.

THOMAS. Come, come Emily. The girl's a good one for to work, and that she is.

EMILY. Be quiet, Thomas. This is my business, and you'll please to keep your words till they're wanted.

MAGGIE. O mistress, I didn't mean no harm, I didn't.

EMILY. I don't want no words nor no tears neither.

MAGGIE. [*Beginning to cry loudly.*] I be the only girl as have stopped with you more nor a month, I be. T'others wouldn't bide a day, some of them.

EMILY. Be quiet. Back to your work with you. And when the hay is all carried, off with you, ungrateful minx, to where you came from.

JESSIE. O let us keep her always, Mother, she's kind.

ROBIN. Don't you cry, Mag. I'll marry you when I'm a big man like Daddy.

THOMAS. Harken to them, Emily! She's been a good maid to the children. I'd not part with any one so hasty, if 'twas me.

EMILY. [*Very angrily.*] When I want your opinion, Thomas, I'll ask for it. Suppose you was to go out and see after something which you do understand.

THOMAS. O I'll go down to the field fast enough, I can tell you. 'Twas only being hungered as drove me into the hornets' nest, as you might say.

EMILY. [*Ironing fiercely.*] What's that ?

THOMAS. Nothing. I did only say as I was a-going back to the field when George do come home.

EMILY. There again. Did you ever know the man to be so slow before. I warrant as he have gone drinking or mischiefing down at the Spotted Cow instead of coming straight home with they chicken.

THOMAS. Nay, nay. George is not the lad to do a thing like that. A quieter more well bred up lad nor George never trod in shoes.

EMILY [*Glancing at* MAGGIE.] What are you tossing your head like that for, Maggie ? Please to recollect as you're a lazy, good-for-nothing little slut of a maid servant, and not a circus pony all decked out for the show.

JESSIE. Maggie's fond of Georgie. And Georgie's kind to Mag.

MAGGIE. [*Fearfully.*] O don't, Miss Jessie, for goodness sake.

EMILY. [*Viciously.*] I'll soon put an end to anything in that quarter.

THOMAS. Now, Emily—take it quiet. Why, we shall have Clara upon us before us knows where we are.

EMILY. [*Folding the curtains.*] I'll settle her too, if she comes before I'm ready for her.

ROBIN. [*Pointing through the open.*] There's George, coming with the basket.

[GEORGE *comes into the room. He carefully rubs his feet on the mat as he enters. Then he advances to the table.* MAGGIE *dries her eyes with the back of her hand.* JESSIE *is standing with her arm in* MAGGIE'S.

EMILY. Well, and where have you been all this while, I'd like to know ?

GEORGE. To Brook Farm, mam, and home.

EMILY. You've been up to some mischief on the way, I warrant.

THOMAS. Come, Emily.

[GEORGE *looks calmly into* EMILY'S *face. Then his gaze travels leisurely round the room.*

GEORGE. I was kept waiting while they did pluck and dress the chicken.

EMILY. [*Lifting the cloth covering the basket, and looking within it.*] I'd best have gone myself. Of all the thick-headed men I ever did see, you're the thickest. Upon my word you are.

GEORGE. What's wrong now, mistress ?

EMILY. 'Taint chicken at all what you've been and fetched me.

GEORGE. I'll be blowed if I do know what 'tis then.

EMILY. If I'd been given a four arms and legs at birth same as th' horses, I'd have left a pair of them at home and gone and done the job myself, I would. And then you should see what I'd have brought back.

GEORGE. You can't better what I've got here. From the weight it might be two fat capons. So it might.

EMILY. [*Seizing the basket roughly.*] Here, Mag, off into the pantry with them. A couple of skinny frogs from out the road ditch would have done as well. And you, Jess, upstairs with these clean curtains and lay them careful on the bed. I'll put them to the windows later.

THOMAS. George, my boy, did you meet with any one on the way, like ?

EMILY. You'd best ask no questions if you don't want to be served with lies, Thomas.

GEORGE. [*Throwing a glance of disdain at* EMILY.] Miles Hooper and Farmer Jenner was taking the air 'long of one another in the wood, master.

THOMAS. Miles Hooper and Luke a-taking of the air, and of a weekday morning !

GEORGE. That they was, master. And they did stop I—

EMILY. Ah, now you've got it, Thomas. Now we shall know why George was upon the road the best part of the day and me kept waiting for the chicken.

GEORGE. [*Steadily.*] Sunday clothes to the back of both of them. And, when was Miss Clara expected up at home.

THOMAS. Ah, 'tis a fair commotion all over these parts already, I warrant. There wasn't nothing else spoke of in market last time, but how as sister Clara with all her money was to come home.

JESSIE. [*Coming back.*] I've laid the curtains on the bed, shall I gather some flowers and set them on the table, mother ?

EMILY. I'd like to see you ! Flowers in the bedroom ? I never heard tell of such senseless goings on. What next, I'd like to know ?

GEORGE. Miss Clara always did fill a mug of clover blooms and set it aside of her bed when her was a little thing—so high.

JESSIE. Do you remember our fine aunt, then, Georgie ?

GEORGE. I remembers Miss Clara right enough.

EMILY. Don't you flatter yourself, George, as such a coxsy piece of town goods will trouble herself to remember you.

THOMAS. The little maid had a good enough heart to her afore she was took away from us.

JESSIE. Do you think our aunt Clara has growed into a coxsy town lady, George ?

GEORGE. No, I do not, Miss Jessie.

EMILY. [*Beginning to stir about noisily as she sets the kitchen in order.*] Get off with you to the field, Thomas, can't you. I've had enough to do as 'tis without a great hulking man standing about and taking up all the room.

THOMAS. Come, George, us'll clear out down to th' hay field, and snatch a bite as we do go.

GEORGE. That's it, master.

EMILY. [*Calling angrily after them.*] There's no dinner for no one to-day, I tell you.

[THOMAS *and* GEORGE *go out of the back kitchen door.* EMILY *begins putting the irons away, folding up the ironing sheet and setting the chairs back against the wall.*

[JESSIE *and* ROBIN, *from their places at the table, watch her intently.*

EMILY. [*As she moves about.*] 'Twouldn't be half the upset if the wench was coming by herself, but to have a hussy of a serving maid sticking about in the rooms along of us, is more nor I can stand.

[*She begins violently to sweep up the hearth.*

[*Steps are heard outside.*

JESSIE. Hark, what's that, mother ?

EMILY. I'll give it to any one who wants to come in here.

JESSIE. [*Running to the open door.*] They're coming up the path. 'Tis our fine auntie and two grand gentlemen either side of she.

ROBIN. [*Running also to the door.*] O I want to look on her too.

EMILY. [*Putting the broom in a corner.*] 'Tis no end to the vexation. But she'll have to wait on herself. I've no time to play the dancing bear. And that I've not.

[JOAN, *between* MILES HOOPER *and* LUKE JENNER, *comes up to the open door.*

MILES. [*To Jessie.*] See here, my little maid, what'll you give Mister Hooper for bringing this pretty lady safe up to the farm ?

JESSIE. I know who 'tis you've brought. 'Tis my Aunt Clara.

LUKE. You're a smart little wench, if ever there was one.

ROBIN. I know who 'tis, too, 'cause of the spangled plumes in the bonnet of she. Mother said as there'd be some.

EMILY. [*Coming forward.*] Well, Clara, if 'twas by the morning coach as you did come, you're late. If 'twas by th' evening one, you're too soon by a good few hours.

MILES. Having come by the morning coach, Miss Clara had the pleasant fancy to stroll here through the woodlands, Missis Spring.

LUKE. Ah, and 'twas lost on the way as we did find her, like a strayed sheep.

MILES. And ours has been the privilege to bring the fair wanderer safely home.

EMILY. [*Scornfully looking* JOAN *over from head to foot.*] Where's that serving wench of yours got to, Clara ?

MILES. Our young missy had a wish for solitude. She sent her maid on by another road.

EMILY. The good-for-nothing hussy. I warrant as she have found something of mischief for her idle hands to do.

MILES. If I may venture to say so, our Miss Clara is somewhat fatigued by her long stroll. London young ladies are very delicately framed, Missis Spring.

EMILY. [*Pointing ungraciously.*] There's chairs right in front of you.

[MILES *and* LUKE *lead* JOAN *forward, placing her in an armchair with every attention.* JOAN *sinks into it, and, taking a little fan from the silken bag on her arm, begins to fan herself violently.*

EMILY. [*Watching her with fierce contempt.*] Maybe as you'd like my kitchen wench to come and do that for you, Clara, seeing as your fine maid is gadding about the high roads instead of minding what it concerns her to attend to.

JOAN. [*Faintly.*] O no, thank you. The day is rather warm—that's all.

EMILY. Warm, I should think it was warm in under of that great white curtain.

JESSIE. Aunt Clara, I'm Jessie.

JOAN. Are you, my dear ?

ROBIN. And I'm Robin.

MILES. Now, I wager, if you are both good little children, this pretty lady will give you each a kiss.

JOAN. [*Faintly.*] To be sure I will.

JESSIE. Then you'll have to take off that white thing from your face. 'Tis like what mother do spread over the currant bushes to keep the birds from the fruit.

[JOAN *slowly raises her veil, showing her face.*

JESSIE. Shall I give you a kiss, Aunt ?

EMILY. I'd be careful if I was you, Jess. Fine ladies be brittle as fine china.

JESSIE. O I'll kiss her very lightly, Mother.

[*She goes up to* JOAN *and kisses her.* ROBIN *then reaches up his face and* JOAN *kisses him.*

ROBIN. [*Rubbing his mouth.*] The flour do come from Aunt same as it does from a new loaf.

MILES. [*To* JOAN.] You must pardon these ignorant little country brats, Miss Clara.

JOAN. O there's nothing amiss, thank you.

EMILY. Amiss, who said as there was ? When folks what can afford to lodge at the inn do come down and fasten theirselves on the top of poor people, they must take things as they do find them and not start grumbling at the first set off.

LUKE. There, there, Missis Spring. There wasn't naught said about grumbling. But Miss Clara have come a smartish long distance, and it behoves us all as she should find summat of a welcome at the end of her journey, like.

MILES. [*Aside to* JOAN.] How strange this country tongue must fall on your ears, Miss Clara !

JOAN. I don't understand about half of what they say.

EMILY. [*Overhearing her.*] O, you don't, don't you. Well, Clara, I was always one for plain words, and I say 'tis a pity when folks do get above the position to which they was bred, and for all the fine satins and plumes

upon you, the body what's covered by them belongs to Clara Spring, what's sister to Thomas. And all the world knows what Thomas is—A poor, mean spirited, humble born man with but two coats to the back of him, and with not a thought to the mind of him which is not foolishness. And I judge from by what they be in birth, and not by the bags of gold what have been left them by any old madams in their dotage. So now you see how I takes it all and you and me can start fair, like.

JOAN. [*To* LUKE.] O Mister—Mister Jenner, I feel so faint.

MILES. [*Taking her fan.*] Allow me. [*He begins to fan her.*] I assure you she means nothing by it. It's her way. You see, she knows no better.

LUKE. I'd fetch out summat for her to eat if I was you, missis. 'Tis famished as the poor young maid must be.

EMILY. She should have come when 'twas meal time then. I don't hold with bites nor drinks in between whiles.

JOAN. O I'm dying for a glass of milk—or water would do as well.

MILES. My dear young lady—anything to oblige. [*Turning to Jessie.*] Come, my little maid, see if you can't make yourself useful in bringing a tray of refreshment for your auntie. And you [*turning to Robin*] trot off and help sister.

EMILY. Not if I know it. Stop where you are, Jess. Robin, you dare to move. If Clara wants to eat and drink I'm afeared she must wait till supper time.

ROBIN. There be chicken and sparrow grass for supper, Aunt.

JESSIE. And a great pie of gooseberries.

JOAN. (*Faintly.*] O I couldn't touch a mouthful of food, don't speak to me about it.

ROBIN. I likes talking of dinner. After I've done eating of it, I likes next best to talk about it.

LUKE. See here, missis. Let's have a glass of summat cool for Miss Clara.

EMILY. [*Calling angrily.*] Maggie, Maggie, where are you, you great lazy-boned donkey ?

MAGGIE. [*Comes in from the back kitchen, her apron held to her eyes.*] Did you call me, mistress ?

EMILY. Get up a bucket of water from the well Master's sister wants a drink.

MAGGIE. [*Between sobs.*] Shall I bring it in the bucket, or would the young lady like it in a jug ?

EMILY. [*With exasperation.*] There's no end to the worriting that other folks do make.

JESSIE. Let me go and help poor Maggie, mother.

ROBIN. [*To* JOAN.] Do you know what Maggie's crying for, Aunt Clara ?

JOAN. I'm sure I don't, little boy.

ROBIN. 'Tis because she's got to go. Mother's sent her off. 'Twas what she said of mother's tongue.

EMILY. [*Roughly taking hold of* ROBIN *and* JESSIE.] Come you along with me, you ill-behaved little varmints. 'Tis the back kitchen and the serving maid as is the properest place for such as you. I'll not have you bide 'mongst the company no longer. [*She goes out with the children and followed by* MAGGIE.]

[*Directly they have left the room* JOAN, *whose manner has been nervously shrinking, seems to recover herself and she assumes a languid, artificial air, badly imitating the ways of a lady of fashion.*

JOAN. [*Fanning herself with her handkerchief and her fan.*] Well, I never did meet with such goings on before.

MILES. You and I know how people conduct themselves in London, Miss Clara. We must not expect to find the same polite ways down here.

LUKE. Come now, 'tisn't so bad as all that with we. There baint many what has the tongue of mistress yonder.

JOAN. I'm quite unused to such people.

LUKE. And yet, Miss Clara, 'tisn't as though they were exactly strangers to you like.

JOAN. They feel as good as strangers to me, any way.

MILES. Ah, how well I understand that, Miss. 'Tisn't very often as we lay a length of fine silken by the side of unbleached woollen at my counters.

JOAN. I could go through with it better perhaps, if I didn't feel so terrible faint and sinking.

LUKE. [*Going to the back kitchen door.*] Here, Maggie, stir yourself up a bit. The lady is near fainting, I do count.

JESSIE. [*Runs in with a tray on which is a jug of water and a glass.*] I'm bringing the drink for Aunt, Mr. Jenner. Maggie's crying ever so badly, and Mother's sent her upstairs to wash her face and put her hair tidy.

[JESSIE *puts the tray on the table near to where* JOAN *is sitting.* MILES HOOPER *busies himself in pouring out a glass of water and in handing it with a great deal of exaggerated deference to* JOAN.

JOAN. [*Drinking.*] Such a coarse glass!

MILES. Ah, you must let me send you up one from my place during your stay here. Who could expect a lady to drink from such a thing as that?

JOAN. [*Laying aside the glass.*] There's a taste of mould in the water too.

JESSIE. It's fresh. Mother drawed it up from the well, she did.

JOAN. [*Looking disdainfully round on the room.*] Such a strange room. So very common.

LUKE. Nay, you mustn't judge of the house by this. Don't you recollect the parlour yonder, with the stuffed birds and the chiney cupboard?

JOAN. [*Looking round again.*] Such an old-fashioned place as this I never did see. 'Tis a low sort of room too, no carpet on the boards nor cloth to the table, nor nothing elegant.

MILES. Ah, we find the mansions in town very different to a country farm house, don't we Miss?

JOAN. I should think we did, Mister Hooper. Why,

look at that great old wooden chair by the hearth? Don't it look un-stylish, upon my word, with no cushions to it nor nothing.

JESSIE. [*Coming quite close to* JOAN *and looking straight into her face.*] That's great gran'ma's chair, what Dad said you'd be best pleased for to see.

[JOAN *looks very confused and begins to fan herself hastily.*

JESSIE. And th' old clock's another thing what Dad did say as you'd look upon.

JOAN. O the old clock's well enough, to be sure.

JESSIE. I did want to gather a nosegay of flowers to set in your bedroom, Aunt, but Mother, she said, no.

JOAN. [*Languidly.*] I must say I don't see any flowers blooming here that I should particular care about having in my apartment.

JESSIE. And Father said as how you'd like to smell the blossoms in the garden. And Georgie told as how you did use to gather the clover blooms when you was a little girl and set them by you where you did sleep.

JOAN. [*Crossly.*] O run away, child, I'm tired to death with all this chatter. How would you like to be so pestered after such a travel over the rough country roads as I have had?

LUKE. Now, my little maid, off you go. Take back the tray to Mother, and be careful as you don't break the glasses on it.

JESSIE. [*Taking up the tray.*] I'm off to play in the hayfield along of Robin, then.

[LUKE *opens the back kitchen door for her and she goes out. Meanwhile* MILES *has taken up the fan and is fanning* JOAN, *who leans back in her chair with closed eyes and exhausted look.*

LUKE. [*Coming to her side and sitting down.*] 'Twill seem more homelike when Thomas do come up from the field.

JOAN. [*Raising herself and looking at him.*] You mustn't trouble about me, Mister Jenner. I shall be quite comfortable presently.

[*The back door opens and* MAGGIE *comes hurriedly in.*

MAGGIE. Please, mistress, there be a young person a-coming through the rick yard.

JOAN. [*Nervously.*] A young person ?

MAGGIE. Mistress be at the gooseberries a-gathering of them, and the children be gone off to th' hay field.

MILES. 'Tis very likely your serving maid, dear Miss. Shall I fetch the young woman in to you ?

JOAN. My maid, did you say ? My maid ?

LUKE. Ah, depend on it, 'tis she.

MAGGIE. The young person do have all the looks of a serving wench, mistress. She be tramping over the yard with naught but a white handkerchief over the head of she and a poking into most of the styes and a-calling of the geese and poultry.

LUKE. That's her, right enough. Bring her in, Mag.

JOAN. [*Agitatedly.*] No, no—I mean—I want to see her particular—and alone. I'll go to meet her. You—gentlemen—

[MAGGIE *goes slowly into the back kitchen.*

MILES. [*Placing a chair for* JOAN.] Delicate ladies should not venture out into the heat at this time of day.

JOAN. [*With sudden resolution ignoring the chair and going to the window.*] Then, do you two kind gentlemen take a stroll in the garden. I have need of the services of my—my young woman. But when she has put me in order after the dusty journey, I shall ask you to be good enough to come back and while away an hour for me in this sad place.

MILES. [*Fervently.*] Anything to oblige a lady, miss.

LUKE. That's right. Us'll wait while you do lay aside your bonnet.

[MILES *and* LUKE *go out through the garden door.* MILES, *turning to bow low before he disappears.* JOAN *stands as though distraught in the middle of the room. Through the open door of the back kitchen the voices of* CLARA *and* MAGGIE *are distinctly heard.*

CLARA. Is no one at home then ?

MAGGIE. Ah, go you straight on into the kitchen, you'll find whom you be searching for in there. I'd take and shew you in myself only I'm wanted down to th' hayfield now.

CLARA. Don't put yourself to any trouble about me. I know my way.

[CLARA *comes into the kitchen. She has tied a white handkerchief over her head, and carries a bunch of wild flowers in her hands.*

CLARA. Still in your cloak and bonnet ! Why, I thought by now you would have unpacked our things and made yourself at home.

JOAN. [*Joining her hands supplicatingly and coming towards* CLARA, *speaking almost in a whisper.*] O mistress, you'll never guess what I've been and done. But 'twasn't all my fault at the commencement.

CLARA. [*Looking her over searchingly.*] You do look very disturbed, Joan, what has happened ?

JOAN. 'Twas the fine bonnet and cloak, mam. 'Twas they as did it.

CLARA. Did what ?

JOAN. Put the thought into my head, like.

CLARA. What thought ?

JOAN. As how 'twould feel to be a real grand lady, like you, mistress.

CLARA. What then, Joan ?

JOAN. So I began to pretend all to myself as how that I was one, mistress.

CLARA. Come, tell me all.

JOAN. And whilst I was sat down upon that fallen tree, and sort of pretending to myself, the two gentlemen came along.

CLARA. What gentlemen ?

JOAN. Gentlemen as was after courting you, mistress.

CLARA. Courting me ?

JOAN. Yes; and they commenced speaking so nice and respectful like.

CLARA. Go on, Joan, don't be afraid.

JOAN. It did seem to fall in with the game I was a-playing with myself. And then, before I did know how, 'twas they was both of them a-taking me for you, mam.

CLARA. And did you not un-deceive them, Joan ?

JOAN. [*Very ashamedly.*] No, mam.

CLARA. You should have told them the truth about yourself at once.

JOAN. O I know I should have, mistress. But there was something as held me back when I would have spoke the words.

CLARA. I wonder what that could have been ?

JOAN. 'Twas them being such very nice and kind gentlemen. And, O mistress, you'll not understand it, because you've told me many times as the heart within you have never been touched by love.

CLARA. [*Suddenly sitting down.*] And has yours been touched to-day, Joan, by love ?

JOAN. That it have, mistress. Love have struck at it heavily.

CLARA. Through which of the gentlemen did it strike, Joan ?

JOAN. Through both. Leastways, 'tis Mister Jenner that my feelings do go out most quickly to, mistress. But 'tis Mister Hooper who do court the hardest and who has the greatest riches like.

CLARA. Well, and what do you want me to do or to say now, Joan ?

JOAN. See here, mistress, I want you to give me a

chance. They'll never stoop to wed me if they knows as I'm but a poor serving maid.

CLARA. Your dressing up as a fine lady won't make you other than what you are, Joan.

JOAN. Once let me get the fish in my net, mistress.

CLARA. Are you proposing to catch the two, Joan ?

JOAN. I shall take the one as do offer first, mistress.

CLARA. That'll be Mister Hooper, I should think.

JOAN. I should go riding in my own chaise, mistress, if 'twas him.

CLARA. But, Joan, either of these men would have to know the truth before there could be any marriage.

JOAN. I knows that full well, mistress. But let one of them just offer hisself. By that time my heart and his would be so closely twined together like, 'twould take more nor such a little thing as my station being low to part us.

[CLARA *sits very still for a few moments, looking straight before her, lost in thought.* JOAN *sinks on to a chair by the table as though suddenly tired out, and she begins to cry gently.*

CLARA. Listen, Joan. I'm one for the straight paths. I like to walk in open fields and over the bare heath. Only times come when one is driven to take to the ways which are set with bushes and with briars.

JOAN. [*Lifting her head and drying her eyes.*] O mistress, I feel to be asking summat as is too heavy for you to give.

CLARA. But for a certain thing, I could never have lent myself to this acting game of yours, Joan.

JOAN. No, mistress ?

CLARA. Only that, to-day, my heart too has gone from my own keeping.

JOAN. O mistress, you don't mean to say as his lordship have followed us down already.

CLARA. [*Scornfully.*] His lordship ! As if I should be stirred by him !

JOAN. [*Humbly.*] Who might it be, mistress, if I may ask ?

CLARA. 'Tis one who would never look upon me with thoughts of love if I went to him as I am now, Joan.

JOAN. I can't rightly understand you, mam.

CLARA. My case is just the same as yours, Joan. You say that your fine gentlemen would not look upon a serving maid.

JOAN. I'm certain of it, mistress.

CLARA. And the man I—I love will never let his heart go out to mine with the heaviness of all these riches lying between us.

JOAN. I count that gold do pave the way for most of us, mistress.

CLARA. So for this once, I will leave the clear high road, Joan. And you and I will take a path that is set with thorns. Pray God they do not wound us past healing at the end of our travel.

JOAN. O mistress, 'twill be a lightsome journey for me.

CLARA. But the moment that you reach happiness, Joan, remember to confess.

JOAN. There won't be nothing to fear then, mistress.

CLARA. Make him love you for yourself, Joan. O we must each tie the heart of our true love so tightly to our own that naught shall ever be able to cut the bonds.

JOAN. Yes, mistress, and I'm sure I'm very much obliged to you.

CLARA. Ah, I am lending myself to all this, because I, too, have something to win or lose.

JOAN. Where did you meet him, mistress ?

CLARA. I did not meet him. I stood on the high ground, and he passed below. His face was raised to the light, and I saw its look. I think my love for him has always lain asleep in my heart, Joan. But when he passed beneath me in the meadow, it awoke.

JOAN. O mistress, what sort of an appearance has the gentleman ?

CLARA. I don't know how to answer you, Joan.

JOAN. I count as it would take a rare, grand looking man for to put his lordship into the shadow, like.

CLARA. You are right there, Joan. But now we must talk of your affairs. Your fine courtiers will be coming in presently and you must know how to receive them in a good way.

JOAN. That's what do hamper me dreadful, my speech and other things. How would it be if you was to help me a little bit, like?

CLARA. With all my heart.

JOAN. How should I act so not to be found out, mistress?

CLARA. You must speak little, and low. Do not show haste in your goings and comings. Put great care into your way of eating and drinking.

JOAN. O that will be a fearsome hard task. What else?

CLARA. You must be sisterly with Thomas.

JOAN. I'd clean forgot him. I don't doubt but what he'll ferret out the truth in no time.

CLARA. I don't think so. I was but a little child when I left him. He will not remember how I looked. And our colouring is alike, Joan.

JOAN. 'Tis the eating and drinking as do play most heavily upon my mind, mistress.

CLARA. Then think of these words as you sit at table. Eat as though you were not hungry and drink as though there were no such thing as thirst. Let your hands move about your plate as if they were too tired to lift the knife and fork.

[JOAN, *darts to the dresser—seizes up a plate with a knife and fork, places them on the table and sits down before them, pretending to cut up meat.* CLARA *watches her smilingly.*

JOAN. [*Absently, raising the knife to her mouth.*] How's that, mistress?

CLARA. Not so, not so, Joan. That might betray you.

JOAN. What, mistress?

CLARA. 'Tis the fork which journeys to the mouth, and the knife stops at home on the plate.

JOAN. [*Dispiritedly.*] 'Tis almost more than I did reckon for when I started.

CLARA. Well, we mustn't think of that now. We must hold up our spirits, you and I.

JOAN. [*Getting up and putting away the crockery.*] I'd best take off the bonnet and the cloak, mistress, hadn't I?

CLARA. Yes, that you had. We will go upstairs together and I will help you change into another gown. Come quickly so that we may have plenty of time.

[*They go towards the staircase door,* CLARA *leading the way. With her hand on the latch of the door she gives one look round the kitchen. Then with a sudden movement she goes up to the wooden armchair at the hearth and bends her head till her lips touch it, she then runs upstairs, followed by* JOAN.

ACT II.—Scene 2.

After a few moments MILES HOOPER *and* LUKE JENNER *come into the kitchen. They both look round the room enquiringly.*

LUKE. Ah, she be still up above with that there serving wench what's come.

MILES. My good man, you didn't expect our fair miss to have finished her toilet under an hour, did you?

LUKE. I don't see what there was to begin on myself, let alone finish.

MILES. 'Tis clear you know little of the ways of our town beauties, Luke.

LUKE. Still, I mean to have my try with her, Miles Hooper.

MILES. [*Sarcastically.*] I'm quite agreeable, Mister Jenner.

[THOMAS *and* GEORGE *come in.* GEORGE *carries a bucket of water.*

THOMAS. Where's the little maid got to? George and me be come up from the field on purpose for to bid her welcome home.

MILES. Miss is still at her toilet, farmer.

[JOAN, *in a flowered silk gown, comes slowly and carefully into the room, followed by* CLARA, *who carries a lace shawl over one arm. She has put on a large white apron, but wears nothing on her head but the narrow blue ribbon. During the following scene she stands quietly, half hidden by the door.*

[JOAN *looks nervously round the room, then she draws herself up very haughtily.* MILES *comes forward and bows low.*

THOMAS. [*Looking* JOAN *up and down.*] Well, bless my soul, who'd have guessed at the change it do make in a wench?

JOAN. [*Holding out her hand, very coldly.*] A good afternoon to you, sir.

THOMAS. [*Taking her hand slowly.*] Upon my word, but you might knock me over.

MILES. Miss has grown into a very superb young lady, Thomas.

THOMAS. [*Still looking at her.*] That may be so, yet 'twasn't as such I had figured she in the eye of my mind, like. [*There is a moment's silence.*

THOMAS. George, my boy, you and sister Clara used to be up to rare games one with t'other once on a time. [*Turning to* JOAN.] There, my wench, I count you've not forgotten Georgie?

JOAN. I'm afeared I've not much of a memory.

THOMAS. Shake hands, my maid, and very like as the memory will come back to roost same as the fowls do.

JOAN. [*Bowing coldly.*] Good afternoon, George.

MILES. [*Aside to Luke.*] Now that's what I call a bit of stylish breeding.

[GEORGE *has made no answer to* JOAN'S *bow. He quietly ignores it, and takes up his pail of water. As he does so he catches sight of* CLARA, *who has been watching the whole scene from the corner where she is partly concealed. He looks at her for one moment, and then sets the bucket down again.*

THOMAS. Why, George—I guess as it's took you as it took me, us didn't think how 'twould appear when Miss Clara was growed up.

GEORGE. [*Quietly.*] No, us did not, master.

[*He carries his pail into the back kitchen as* EMILY *and the children come in.*

EMILY. What's all this to-do in my kitchen, I should like to know ?

THOMAS. Us did but come up for to—to give a hand-shake to sister Clara, like.

EMILY. Well, now you can go off back to work again. And you —[*turning to* JOAN]—now that you've finished curling of your hair and dressing of yourself up, you can go and sit down in the best parlour along with your fancy gentlemen.

MILES. [*Offering his arm to* JOAN.] It will be my sweet pleasure to conduct Missy to the parlour.

[LUKE *offers his arm on the other side, and* JOAN *moves off with both the young men.*

JOAN. [*As she goes.*] Indeed, I shall be glad to rest on a comfortable couch. I'm dead tired of the country air already.

ROBIN. [*Calling after her.*] You'll not go off to sleep afore the chicken and sparrow grass is ate, will you, Aunt ?

[MILES, LUKE *and* JOAN *having gone out,* EMILY *begins to bang the chairs back in their places and to arrange the room, watched by the two children.* CLARA, *who has remained half hidden by the door, now goes quietly upstairs.*

EMILY. [*Calling.*] Here, George, Mag.

[GEORGE *comes in.*

EMILY. Well, George, 'tisn't much worse nor I expected.

JESSIE. I don't like Aunt Clara.

ROBIN. I hates her very much.

GEORGE. [*Slowly.*] And I don't seem to fancy her neither.

[*Curtain.*]

ACT III.—Scene 1.

Two days have passed by.

It is morning. CLARA, *wearing an apron and a muslin cap on her head, sits by the kitchen table mending a lace handkerchief.* MAGGIE, *who is dusting the plates on the dressers, pauses to watch her.*

MAGGIE. I'd sooner sweep the cow sheds out and that I would, nor have to set at such a niggly piece of sewing work as you.

CLARA. I cannot do it quickly, it is so fine.

MAGGIE. I count 'tis very nigh as bad as the treadmills, serving a young miss such as yourn be.

CLARA. What makes you say that, Maggie ?

MAGGIE. Missis be very high in her ways and powerful sharp in the tongue, but I declare as your young lady will be worser nor missis when she do come to that age.

CLARA. Why do you think this, Mag ?

MAGGIE. O she do look at any one as though they was lower nor the very worms in the ground. And her speaks as though each word did cost she more nor a shilling to bring it out. And see how destructive she be with her fine clothing. A laced petticoat tore to ribbons last night, and to-day yon handkerchief.

CLARA. These things are soon mended.

[MAGGIE *continues to dust for a few moments.*

MAGGIE. The day you comed here, 'twas a bit of ribbon as you did have around of your hair.

CLARA. [*After a moment's hesitation.*] I put it on to keep my hair neat on the journeying.

MAGGIE. [*Coming nearer.*] I count as you've not missed it, have you ?

CLARA. Indeed I have, and I think I must have lost it in the hayfield.

MAGGIE. 'Tain't lost.

CLARA. Where is it then ?

MAGGIE. Look here, I could tell you, but I shan't.

CLARA. If you have found it, Maggie, you may keep it.

MAGGIE. 'Twould be a fine thing to be a grand serving maid as you be, and to give away ribbons, so 'twould.

[CLARA *takes no notice of her and goes on sewing.*

MAGGIE. [*More insistently.*] 'Twasn't me as found the ribbon.

CLARA. Who was it then ?

MAGGIE. I daresay you'd like for to know, but I'm not going to say nothing more about it.

[MAGGIE *leans against the table watching* CLARA *as she sews.*

[EMILY *with both the children now come in.* EMILY *carries a basket of potatoes, and* JESSIE *a large bowl.*

EMILY. [*Setting down the basket.*] Maggie, you idle, bad girl, whatever are you doing here when master expects you down in the meadow to help with the raking ?

MAGGIE. I be just a-going off yonder, mistress.

EMILY. I'd thank other folk not to bring dressed up fine young serving minxes down here—you was bad enough afore, Maggie, but you'll be a hundred times worser now.

MAGGIE. I'll be off and help master. I've been and put the meat on to boil as you said, missis.

[MAGGIE *goes off.*

[CLARA *continues to sew, quietly.* JESSIE *has put her bowl down on the table, and now comes to her side.* ROBIN *also comes close to her.* EMILY *flings herself into a chair for a moment and contemptuously watches them.*

JESSIE. We don't care much about our new aunt, Joan.

ROBIN. Dad said as how Aunt would be sure to bring us sommat good from London town in them great boxes.

JESSIE. And Aunt has been here two days and more, and she hasn't brought us nothing.

EMILY. Your fine aunt have been too much took up with her fancy gentlemen to think of what would be suitable behaviour towards you children.

JESSIE. Will Aunt Clara get married soon ?

EMILY. 'Tis to be hoped as she will be. Such a set out in the house I have never seen afore in all my days. Young women as is hale and hearty having their victuals took up to their rooms and a-lying in bed till 'tis noon or later.

JESSIE. 'Tis only one of them as lies in bed.

ROBIN. [*To* CLARA.] Do you think Aunt has got sommat for us upstairs, Joan ?

CLARA. [*Rising and putting down her work.*] I know she has, Robin.

EMILY. Don't let me catch you speaking to Master Spring as though you and he was of the same station, young person.

CLARA. Master Robin, and Miss Jessie, I will go upstairs and fetch the gifts that your aunt has brought for you.

[*She goes leisurely towards the staircase door, smiling at the children.*

EMILY. Ah, and you may tell your young madam that 'tis high time as she was out of bed and abroad. Hear that ? [CLARA *goes out.*

JESSIE. I like her. She speaks so gentle. Not like Aunt.

EMILY. She's a stuck up sort of fine lady herself like. Look at the hands of her, 'tis not a day's hard work as they have done in her life, I'll warrant.

ROBIN. What will she bring us from out of the great boxes, do you think ?

EMILY. Sommat what you don't need, I warrant. 'Tis always so. When folks take it into their heads to give you aught, 'tis very nigh always sommat which you could do better without.

[EMILY *gets up and begins settling the pots on the fire, and fetching a jug of cold water from the back kitchen and a knife which she lays on the table.*

[CLARA *enters carrying some parcels. She brings them to the table. Both the children run to her.*

CLARA. [*Holding out a long parcel to* EMILY *and speaking to the children.*] The first is for your mother, children.

EMILY. [*With an angry exclamation.*] Now, you mark my words, 'twill be sommat as I shall want to fling over the hedge for all the use 'twill be.

[*She comes near, opens the parcel and perceives it to be a length of rich black silk.*

CLARA. My mistress thought it might be suitable.

EMILY. Suitable ? I'll suitable her. When shall my two hands find time to sew me a gown out of it, I'd like to know ? And if 'twas sewn, when would my limbs find time to sit down within of it ? [*Flinging it down on the table.*] Suitable ? You can tell your mistress from me as she can keep her gifts to herself if she can't do better nor this.

JESSIE. [*Stroking the silk.*] O Mother, the feel of it be softer nor a dove's feather.

ROBIN. [*Feeling it too.*] 'Tis better nor the new kittens' fur.

EMILY. Let us see if your aunt have done more handsomely towards you children.

CLARA. I am afraid not. These coral beads are for

Miss Jessie, with her aunt's dear love. And this book of pictures is for Master Robin.

JESSIE. [*Seizing the beads with delight.*] I love a string of beads. [*Putting them on.*] How do they look on me ?

EMILY. Off with them this moment. I'll learn her to give strings of rubbish to my child.

JESSIE. [*Beginning to cry.*] O do let me wear it just a little while, just till dinner, Mother.

EMILY. Have done with that noise. Off with it at once, do you hear.

JESS. [*Taking the necklace off.*] I love the feel of it—might I keep it in my hand then ?

EMILY. [*Seizing it.*] 'Twill be put by with the silk dress. So there. 'Tis not a suitable thing for a little girl like you.

ROBIN. [*Looking up from the pages of his book.*] No one shan't take my book from me. There be pictures of great horses and sheep and cows in it—and no one shan't hide it from me.

EMILY. [*Putting the silk dress and necklace on another table.*] Next time your aunt wants to throw her money into the gutter I hope as she'll ask me to come and see her a-doing of it.

JESSIE. [*Coming up to* CLARA *very tearfully.*] And was there naught for Dad in the great box ?

CLARA. Perhaps there may be.

ROBIN. And did Aunt Clara bring naught for Georgie ?

CLARA. I don't know.

JESSIE. Poor Georgie. He never has nothing gived him.

ROBIN. And Mother puts the worst of the bits on his plate at dinner.

EMILY. [*Sharply.*] Look you here, young woman. Suppose you was to take and do something useful with that idle pair of hands as you've got.

CLARA. Yes, mistress, I should like to help you in something.

EMILY. Us knows what fine promises lead to.

CLARA. But I mean it. Do let me help a little.

EMILY. See them taters ?

CLARA. Yes.

EMILY. Take and peel and wash them and get them ready against when I wants to cook them.

CLARA. [*A little doubtfully.*] Yes—I'll—I'll try—

EMILY. Ah, 'tis just as I thought. You're one of them who would stir the fire with a silver spoon rather nor black their hands with the poker.

CLARA. [*Eagerly.*] No, no—it isn't that. I'll gladly do them. Come, Miss Jessie, you will shew me if I do them wrongly, won't you ?

JESSIE. O yes, I'll help you because I like you, Joan.

ROBIN. I'll help too, when I have finished looking at my book.

[EMILY *goes out.* CLARA *sits down by the table and takes up a potato and the knife and slowly and awkwardly sets to work.* JESSIE *stands by her watching.*

JESSIE. You mustn't take no account of Mother when she speaks so sharp. 'Tis only her way.

ROBIN. Could you come and be our serving maid when Maggie's sent off ?

CLARA. O I should be too slow and awkward at the work, I think.

JESSIE. Yes, you don't do them taters very nice.

ROBIN. That don't matter, I like you, and you can tell me fine things about other parts.

JESSIE. Georgie can tell of fine things too. See, there he comes with the vegetables from the garden.

[GEORGE *comes in with a large basket of vegetables, which he sets down in the back kitchen. Then he stands at the door, silently watching the group near the table.*

JESSIE. Come here, Georgie, and let Joan hear some of the tales out of what you do sing.

GEORGE. What would mistress say if she was to catch me at my songs this time of day ?

JESSIE. Mother's gone upstairs, she won't know nothing.

ROBIN. Come you here, George, and look at my fine book what Aunt have brought me.

GEORGE. [*Slowly approaching the table.*] That be a brave, fine book of pictures, Master Robin.

ROBIN. [*Holding up the open book.*] I don't fancy Aunt Clara much, but I likes her better nor I did because of this book.

[GEORGE'S *eyes wander from the book to* CLARA *as she bends over her work.*

JESSIE. Joan doesn't know how to do them very nicely, does she George!

GEORGE. 'Tis the first time you've been set down to such work, may be, mistress.

JESSIE. You mustn't say "mistress" to Joan, you know. Why, Mother would be ever so angry if she was to hear you. Joan's only a servant.

CLARA. [*Looking up.*] Like you, George.

GEORGE. [*Steadily.*] What I was saying is—'Tis the first time as you have been set afore a bowl of taters like this.

CLARA. You are right, George. It is the first time since—since I was quite a little child. And I think I'm very clumsy at my work.

GEORGE. No one could work with them laces a-falling down all over their fingers.

JESSIE. You should turn back your sleeves for kitchen work, Joan, same as Maggie does.

GEORGE. Yes, you should turn back your sleeves, Miss Joan.

[JOAN *puts aside the knife and basket, turns back her sleeves, and then resumes her work.* GEORGE'S *eyes are rivetted on her hands and arms for a moment. Then he turns as though to go away.*

JESSIE. Don't go away, Georgie. Come and tell us how you like Aunt Clara now that she's growed into such a grand lady.

GEORGE. [*Coming back to the table.*] I don't like nothing about her, Miss Jessie.

JESSIE. Is Aunt very much changed from when she did use to ride the big horses to the trough, Georgie ?

ROBIN. And from the time when th' old gander did take a big piece right out of her arm, Georgie ?

GEORGE. [*His eyes on* CLARA'S *bent head.*] I count her be wonderful changed, like.

JESSIE. So that you would scarce know her ?

GEORGE. So that I should scarce know she.

JESSIE. She have brought Mother a silken gown and me a string of coral beads. But naught for you, Georgie.

GEORGE. I reckon as Miss Clara have not kept me in her remembrance like.

CLARA. [*With sudden earnestness.*] O that she has, George.

JESSIE. She didn't seem to know him by her looks.

CLARA. Looks often speak but poorly for the heart.

ROBIN. [*Who has been watching* CLARA.] See there, Joan. You've been and cut that big tater right in half. Mother will be cross.

CLARA. O dear, I am thoughtless. One cannot work and talk at the same time.

GEORGE. [*Taking basket and knife from her and seating himself on the edge of the table.*] Here,—give them all to me. I understand such work, and 'tis clear that you do not. I'll finish them off in a few minutes, and mistress will never be the wiser.

CLARA. O thank you, George, but am I to go idle ?

GEORGE. You can take up with that there white sewing if you have a mind. 'Tis more suited to your hands nor this rough job.

[CLARA *puts down her sleeves and takes up her needlework.*

JESSIE. Sing us a song, George, whilst you do the taters.

GEORGE. No, Miss Jessie. My mood is not a singing mood this day.

JESSIE. You ask him, Joan.

CLARA. Will not you sing one little verse, George ?

GEORGE. Nay—strangers from London town would have no liking for the songs we sing down here among the fields.

CLARA. There was a song I once heard in the country that pleased me very well.

JESSIE. What was it called ?

CLARA. I cannot remember the name—but there was something of bushes and of briars in it.

JESSIE. I know which that is. 'Tis a pretty song. Sing it, Georgie.

GEORGE. Nay—sing it yourself, Miss Jessie.

JESSIE. 'Tis like this at the beginning.—[*she sings or repeats*]—

"Through bushes and through briars
I lately took my way,
All for to hear the small birds sing
And the lambs to skip and play."

CLARA. That is the song I was thinking of, Jessie.

GEORGE. Can you go on with it, Miss Jessie.

JESSIE. I can't say any more.

CLARA. [*Gently singing or speaking.*]

I overheard my own true love,
Her voice it was so clear.
"Long time I have been waiting for
The coming of my dear."

GEORGE. [*Heaving a sigh.*] That's it.

JESSIE. Go on, Joan, I do like the sound of it.

CLARA. Shall I go on with the song, George ?

GEORGE. As you please.

CLARA.

"Sometimes I am uneasy
And troubled in my mind,
Sometimes I think I'll go to my love
And tell to him my mind."

"And if I would go to my love
My love he will say nay
If I show to him my boldness
He'll ne'er love me again."

JESSIE. When her love was hid a-hind of the bushes and did hear her a-singing so pitiful, what did he do then ?

CLARA. I don't know, Jessie.

JESSIE. I reckon as he did come out to show her as he knowed all what she did keep in her mind.

CLARA. Very likely the briars were so thick between them, Jess, that he never got to the other side for her to tell him.

GEORGE. Yes, that's how 'twas, I count.

JESSIE. [*Running up to* ROBIN.] I'm going to look at your book along of you, Robin.

ROBIN. But I'm the one to turn the leaves, remember.

[*The children sit side by side looking at the picture book.* CLARA *sews.* GEORGE *goes on with the potatoes. As the last one is finished and tossed into the water, he looks at* CLARA *for the first time. A long silence.*

GEORGE. Miss Clara and me was good friends once on a time.

CLARA. Tell me how it was then, George.

GEORGE. I did used to put her on the horse's back, and we would go down to the water trough in the evening time and—

CLARA. What else did you and Miss Clara do together, George ?

GEORGE. Us would walk in the woods aside of one another—And I would lift she to a high branch in a tree—and pretend for to leave her there.

CLARA. And then ?

GEORGE. Her would call upon me pitiful—and I would come back from where I was hid.

CLARA. And did her crying cease ?

GEORGE. She would take and spring as though her

was one of they little wild squirrels as do dance about in the trees.

CLARA. Where would she spring to, George ?

GEORGE. I would hold out my two arms wide to her, and catch she.

CLARA. And did she never fall, whilst springing from the tree, George ?

GEORGE. I never let she fall, nor get hurted by naught so long as her was in the care of me.

CLARA. [*Slowly, after a short pause.*] I do not think she can have forgotten those days, George.

GEORGE. [*Getting up and speaking harshly.*] They're best forgot. Put them away. There be briars and brambles and thorns and sommat of all which do hurt the flesh of man atween that time and this'n.

[CLARA *turns her head away and furtively presses her handkerchief to her eyes.* GEORGE *looks gloomily on the floor.* EMILY *enters.*

EMILY. George, what are you at sitting at the kitchen table I'd like to know ?

[GEORGE *gets hastily off. Both children look up from their book.*

EMILY. [*Looking freezingly at* CLARA.] 'Tis plain as a turnpike what you've been after, young person. If you was my serving wench, 'tis neck and crop as you should be thrown from the door.

CLARA. What for, mistress ?

EMILY. What for ? You have the impudence to ask what for ? I'll soon tell you. For making a fool of George and setting your cap at him and scandalising of my innocent children in their own kitchen.

GEORGE. This be going a bit too far, missis. I'll not have things said like that.

EMILY. Then you may turn out on to the roads where you were took from—a grizzling little roadsters varmint. You do cost more'n what you eats nor what we get of work from out of your body, you great hulk.

CLARA. [*Springing up angrily.*] O I'll not hear such things said. I'll not.

EMILY. Who asked you to speak? Get you upstairs and pull your mistress out of bed—and curl the ringlets of her hair and dust the flour on to her face. 'Tis about all you be fit for.

CLARA. [*Angrily going to the stair door.*] Very well. 'Tis best that I should go. I might say something you would not like.

GEORGE. [*Advancing towards* EMILY.] Look you here, mistress. I've put up with it going on for fifteen years. But sometimes 'tis almost more nor I can bear. If 'twasn't for Master Thomas I'd have cleared out this long time ago.

EMILY. Don't flatter yourself as Thomas needs you, my man.

GEORGE. We has always been good friends, farmer and me. 'Tis not for what I gets from he nor for what he do get out of I as we do hold together. But 'tis this —as he and I do understand one another.

EMILY. We'll see what master has to say when I tell him how you was found sitting on the kitchen table and love-making with that saucy piece of London trash.

GEORGE. I'm off. I've no patience to listen any longer. You called me roadster varmint. Well, let it be so. On the road I was born and on the road I was picked from my dead mother's side, and I count as 'tis on the road as I shall breathe my last. But for all that, I'll not have road dirt flung on me by no one. For, roadsters varmint though I be, there be things which I do hold brighter nor silver and cleaner nor new opened leaves, and I'll not have defilement throwed upon them.

EMILY. [*Seizing the arms of* JESSIE *and* ROBIN.] The lad's raving. 'Tis plain as he's been getting at the cider. Come you off with me to the haymaking, Robin and Jess.

ROBIN. May I take my book along of me?

EMILY. [*Flinging the book down violently.*] I'll book you! What next?

JESSIE. Poor Georgie. He was not courting Joan, mother. He was only doing the taters for her.

EMILY. [*As they go out.*] The lazy good-for-nothing

cat. I'll get her packed off from here afore another sun has set, see if I don't.

[GEORGE *is left alone in the kitchen. When all sounds of* EMILY *and the children have died away, he sighs. Then, looking furtively round the room, he draws a blue ribbon slowly from his pocket. He spreads it out on one hand and stands looking down on it, sadly and longingly. Then he slowly raises it to his lips and kisses it. Just as he is doing this* THOMAS *comes into the room.*

THOMAS. Why, George, my lad.

GEORGE. [*Confusedly putting the ribbon back into his pocket.*] Yes, Master Thomas.

THOMAS. [*Looking meaningly at* GEORGE.] 'Tis a pretty enough young maid, George.

GEORGE. What did you say, Master ?

THOMAS. That one with the bit of blue round the head of her.

GEORGE. Blue ?

THOMAS. Ah, George. I was a young man myself once on a time.

GEORGE. Yes, master.

THOMAS. 'Twasn't a piece of blue ribbon as I did find one day, but 'twas a blossom dropped from her gown.

GEORGE. Whose gown, master ? I'll warrant 'twasn't missus's.

THOMAS. Bless my soul, no. No, no, George. 'Twasn't the mistress then.

GEORGE. Ah, I count as it could not have been she.

THOMAS. First love, 'tis best, George.

GEORGE. Ah, upon my word, that 'tis.

THOMAS. But my maid went and got her married to another.

GEORGE. More's the pity, Master Thomas.

THOMAS. [*Sighing.*] Ah, I often thinks of how it might have been—with her and me, like.

GEORGE. Had that one a soft tongue to her mouth, master ?

THOMAS. Soft and sweet as the field lark, George.

GEORGE. Then that had been the one for you to have wed, Master Thomas.

THOMAS. Ah, George, don't you never run into the trap, no matter whether 'tis baited with the choicest thing you ever did dream on. Once in, never out. There 'tis.

GEORGE. No one would trouble to set a snare for me, master. I baint worth trapping.

THOMAS. Yon be a brave, fine country lad, George, what a pretty baggage from London town might give a year of her life to catch, so be it her had the fortune.

GEORGE. No, no, Master Thomas. Nothing of that. There baint nothing.

THOMAS. There be a piece of blue ribbon, George.

GEORGE. They be coming down and into the room now, master. [*Steps are heard in the staircase.*

THOMAS. We'll off to the meadow then, George.

[GEORGE *and* THOMAS *go out.*

[JOAN, *dressed as a lady of fashion, and followed by* CLARA, *comes into the kitchen.*

CLARA. Now, Joan, if I were you, I should go out into the garden, and let the gentlemen find you in the arbour. Your ways are more easy and natural when you are in the air.

JOAN. O I'm very nigh dead with fright when I'm within doors. 'Tis so hard to move about without knocking myself against sommat. But at table 'tis worst of all.

CLARA. You've stopped up in your room two breakfasts with the headache, and yesterday we took our dinner to the wood.

JOAN. But to-night 'twill be something cruel, for Farmer Thomas have asked them both to supper again.

CLARA. Luke Jenner and the other man ?

JOAN. I beg you to practise me in my ways, a little, afore the time, mistress.

CLARA. That I will. We will find out what is to be

upon the table, and then I will shew you how it is to be eaten.

JOAN. And other things as well as eating. When I be sitting in the parlour, Miss Clara, and Hooper, he comes up and asks my pleasure, what have I got to say to him ?

CLARA. O, I shouldn't trouble about that. I'd open my fan and take no notice if I were you.

JOAN. I do feel so awkward like in speech with Farmer Thomas, mistress. And with the children, too.

CLARA. Come, you must take heart and throw yourself into the acting. Try to be as a sister would with Thomas. Be lively, and kind in your way with the children.

JOAN. I tries to be like old Madam Lovel was, when I talks with them.

CLARA. That cross, rough mode of hers sits badly on any one young, Joan. Be more of yourself, but make little changes in your manner here and there.

JOAN. [*With a heavy sigh.*] 'Tis the here and the there as I finds it so hard to manage.

JESSIE. [*Running in breathlessly.*] A letter, a letter for Aunt Clara. [CLARA *involuntarily puts out her hand.*] No, Joan. I was to give it to Aunt Clara herself. I've run all the way.

[JOAN *slowly takes the letter, looking confused.*

JESSIE. Will you read it now, Aunt ?

JOAN. Run away, little girl, I don't want no children worriting round me now. [*Suddenly recollecting herself and forcing herself to speak brightly.*] I mean—no, my dear little girl, I'd rather wait to read it till I'm by myself ; but thank you very kindly all the same, my pet.

JESSIE. O, but I should like to hear the letter read, so much.

JOAN. Never mind. Run along back to mother, there's a sweet little maid.

JESSIE. I'd sooner stop with you now, you look so much kinder, like.

CLARA. [*Taking* JESSIE'S *hand and leading her to*

the door.] Now, Miss Jessie, your aunt must read her letter in quiet, but if you will come back presently I will have a game with you outside.

JESSIE. [*As she runs off.*] Mother won't let me talk with you any more, alone. She says as you've made a fool of Georgie and you'll do the same by us all.

JOAN. [*When* JESSIE *has run off.*] There now, how did I do that, mistress ?

CLARA. Better, much better.

JOAN. 'Tis the feeling of one thing and the speaking of another, with you ladies and gentlemen. So it appears to me.

CLARA. [*After a moment's thought.*] No. It is not quite like that. But 'tis, perhaps, the dressing up of an ugly feeling in better garments.

JOAN. [*Handing the letter to* CLARA.] There, mistress, 'tis yours, not mine.

CLARA. [*Glancing at it.*] Lord Lovel's writing. [CLARA *opens the letter and reads it through.*] He will not wait longer for my answer. And he is coming here as fast as horses can bring him.

JOAN. O, mistress, whatever shall we do ?

CLARA. We had better own to everything at once. It will save trouble in the end.

JOAN. Own to everything now, and lose all just as my hand was closing upon it, like !

CLARA. Poor Joan, it will not make any difference in the end, if the man loves you truly.

JOAN. Be kind and patient just to the evening, mistress. Hooper is coming up to see me now. I'd bring him to offer his self, if I was but left quiet along of him for a ten minutes or so.

CLARA. And then, Joan ?

JOAN. And then, when was all fixed up comfortable between us, mistress, maybe as you could break it gently to him so as he wouldn't think no worse of me.

[CLARA *gets up and goes to the window, where she looks out for a few minutes in silence.* JOAN *cries softly meanwhile.*

CLARA. [*Turning towards* JOAN.] As you will, Joan. Very likely 'twill be to-morrow morning before my lord reaches this place.

JOAN. O bless you for your goodness, mistress. And I do pray as all may go as well with you as 'tis with me.

CLARA. [*Sadly.*] That is not likely, Joan.

JOAN. What is it stands in the way, mistress?

CLARA. Briars, Joan. Thorns of pride, and many another sharp and hurting thing.

JOAN. Then take you my counsel, mistress, and have his lordship when he do offer next.

CLARA. I'll think of what you say, Joan. There comes a moment when the heart is tired of being spurned, and it would fain get into shelter. [*A slight pause.*

JOAN. [*Looking through the window.*] Look up quickly, mistress. There's Hooper.

CLARA. [*Getting up.*] Then I'll run away. May all be well with you, dear Joan. [CLARA *goes out.*

[JOAN *seats herself in a high-backed chair and opens her fan.* MILES *enters, carrying a small box.*

MILES. Already astir, Miss Clara. 'Tis early hours to be sure for one of our London beauties.

[*He advances towards her, and she stretches out her hand without rising. He takes it ceremoniously.*

JOAN. You may sit down, if you like, Mister Hooper.

[MILES *places a chair in front of* JOAN, *and sits down on it.*

MILES. [*Untying the parcel.*] I've been so bold as to bring you a little keepsake from my place in town, Missy.

JOAN. How kind you are, Mister Miles.

MILES. You'll be able to fancy yourself in Bond Street when you see it, Miss Clara.

JOAN. Now, you do excite me, Mister Hooper.

MILES. [*Opening the box and taking out a handsome spray of bright artificial flowers.*] There, what do you

say to that, Miss ? And we can do you the same in all the leading tints.

JOAN. O, 'tis wonderful modish. I declare I never did see anything to beat it up in town.

MILES. Now I thought as much. I flatter myself that we can hold our own with the best of them in Painswick High Street.

JOAN. I seem to smell the very scent of the blossoms, Mister Hooper.

[*She puts out her hand shyly and takes the spray from* MILES, *pretending to smell it.*

MILES. Well—and what's the next pleasure, Madam ?

[JOAN *drops the spray and begins to fan herself violently.*

MILES. [*Very gently.*] What's Missy's next pleasure?

JOAN. I'm sure I don't know, Mr. Miles.

MILES. Miles Hooper would like Missy to ask for all that is his.

JOAN. O, Mister Hooper, how kind you are.

MILES. Ladies never like the sound of business, so we'll set that aside for a moment and discuss the music of the heart in place of it.

JOAN. Ah, that's a thing I do well understand, Mister Hooper.

MILES. I loved you from the first, Miss. There's the true, high born lady for you, says I to myself. There's beauty and style, elegance and refinement.

JOAN. Now, did you really think all that, Mister Hooper ?

MILES. Do not keep me in suspense, Miss Clara.

JOAN. What about, sir ?

MILES. The answer to my question, Missy.

JOAN. And what was that, I wonder ?

MILES. I want my pretty Miss to take the name of Hooper. Will she oblige her Miles ?

JOAN. O that I will. With all my heart.

MILES. [*Standing up.*] I would not spoil this moment, but by and bye my sweet Missy shall tell me all the particulars of her income, and such trifles.

JOAN. [*Agitatedly.*] O let us not destroy to-day by thoughts of anything but our dear affection one for t'other.

MILES. Why, my pretty town Miss is already becoming countrified in her speech.

JOAN. 'Tis from hearing all the family. But, dear Miles, promise there shan't be nothing but—but love talk between you and me this day. I could not bear it if we was to speak of, of other things, like.

MILES. [*Getting up and walking about the room.*] As you will—as you will. Anything to oblige a lady.

[*He stops before the table, on which is laid* EMILY'S *silk dress, and begins to finger it.*

JOAN. What's that you're looking at ?

MILES. Ten or fifteen shillings the yard, and not a penny under, I'll be bound.

JOAN. O do come and talk to me again and leave off messing with the old silk.

MILES. No, no, Missy, I'm a man of business habits, and 'tis my duty to go straight off to the meadow and seek out brother Thomas. He and I have got to talk things over a bit, you know.

JOAN. Off so soon ! O you have saddened me.

MILES. Nay, what is it to lose a few minutes of sweet company, when life is in front of us, Miss Clara ?

[*He raises her hand, kisses it, and leaves her. As he goes out by the door* CLARA *enters.*

JOAN. O, Mistress—stop him going down to Farmer Thomas at the meadow !

CLARA. Why, Joan, what has happened ?

JOAN. All has happened. But stop him going to the farmer to talk about the—the wedding and the money.

CLARA. The money ?

JOAN. The income which he thinks I have.

CLARA. I'll run, but all this time I've been keeping Master Luke Jenner quiet in the parlour.

JOAN. O what does he want now ?

CLARA. Much the same as the other one wanted.

JOAN. Must I see him ?

CLARA. Yes, indeed he will wait no longer for his answer. He's at boiling point already.

JOAN. Then send him in. But do you run quickly, Miss Clara, and keep Miles Hooper from the farmer.

CLARA. I'll run my best, never fear. [*She goes out.*

[LUKE JENNER *comes in, a bunch of homely flowers in his hand.*

JOAN. [*Seating herself.*] You are early this morning, Mister Jenner.

LUKE. [*Sitting opposite to her.*] I have that to say which would not bide till sunset, Miss Clara.

JOAN. Indeed, Mister Jenner. I wonder what that can be.

LUKE. 'Tis just like this, Miss Clara. The day I first heard as you was coming down here—" I could do with a rich wife if so be as I could win her," I did tell myself.

JOAN. O, Mister Jenner, now did you really ?

LUKE. But when I met you in the wood—saw you sitting there, so still and yet so bright, so fine and yet so homely. " That's the maid for me," I says to myself.

JOAN. [*Tearfully.*] O, Mister Jenner !

LUKE. And if it had been beggar's rags upon her in the place of satin, I'd have said the same.

JOAN. [*Very much stirred.*] O, Mister Jenner, and did you really think like that ?

LUKE. If all the gold that do lie atween me and you was sunk in the deep ocean, 'twould be the best as could happen. There !

JOAN. [*Faintly.*] O, Mister Jenner, why ?

LUKE. Because, very like 'twould shew to you as 'tis yourself I'm after and not the fortune what you've got.

JOAN. Mister Jenner, I'm mighty sorry.

LUKE. Don't say I'm come too late, Miss Clara.

JOAN. You are. Mister Hooper was before you. And now, 'tis he and I who are like to be wed.

LUKE. I might have known I had no chance.

JOAN. [*Rising and trying to hide her emotion.*] I wouldn't have had it happen so for the world, Mr. Jenner.

LUKE. [*Laying his bunch of flowers on the table, his head bent, and his eyes on the ground.*] 'Twas none of your doing, Miss Clara. You've naught to blame yourself for. 'Tis not your fault as you're made so—so beautiful, and yet so homely.

[JOAN *looks at him irresolutely for a moment and then precipitately leaves the room.*

[LUKE *folds his arms on the table and rests his head on them in an attitude of deepest despondency. After a few moments* CLARA *enters.*

CLARA. O, Mister Jenner, what has happened to you.

LUKE. [*Raising his head and pointing to the window.*] There she goes, through the garden with her lover.

CLARA. I wish that you were in his place.

LUKE. [*Bitterly.*] I've no house with golden rails to offer her. Nor any horse and chaise.

CLARA. But you carry a heart within you that is full of true love.

LUKE. What use is the love which be fastened up in a man's heart and can spend itself on naught, I'd like to know. [*He rises as though to go and take up the bunch of flowers which has been lying on the table. Brokenly.*] I brought them for her. But I count as he'll have given her something better nor these.

[CLARA *takes the flowers gently from his hand, and as she does so,* EMILY *enters.*

EMILY. What now if you please! First with George and then with Luke. 'Twould be Thomas next if he wasn't an old sheep of a man as wouldn't know if an eye was cast on him or no. But I'll soon put a stop to all this. Shame on you, Luke Jenner. And you, you fine piece of London vanity, I wants my kitchen to myself, do you hear, so off with you upstairs.

[*She begins to move violently about the kitchen as the curtain falls.*

ACT IV.—Scene 1.

The kitchen is decorated with bunches of flowers. A long table is spread with silver, china and food. CLARA *is setting mugs to each place.* MAGGIE *comes in from the back kitchen with a large dish of salad.*

MAGGIE. When folks do come down to the country-side they likes to enjoy themselves among the vegetables.

CLARA. [*Placing the last mug.*] There—Now all is ready for them.

MAGGIE. [*Bending over a place at the end of the table.*] Come you and look at this great old bumble-dore, Joan, what have flyed in through the window.

CLARA. [*Goes to* MAGGIE'S *side and bends down over the table.*] O what a beautiful thing. Look at the gold on him, and his legs are like feathers.

MAGGIE. [*Taking the bee carefully up in a duster and letting it fly through the window.*] The sign of a stranger, so they do say.

CLARA. A stranger, Maggie ?

MAGGIE. You mind my words, 'tis a stranger as'll sit where yon was stuck, afore the eating be finished.

CLARA. I don't believe in such signs, myself.

MAGGIE. I never knowed it not come true.

[THOMAS *comes in. He is wearing his best clothes and looks pleased, yet nervous.*

THOMAS. Well, maids. Upon my word 'tis a spread. Never saw so many different vituals brought together all at a time afore in this house.

MAGGIE. 'Tis in honour of Miss Clara's going to be married like, master.

THOMAS. So 'tis, so 'tis. Well—A single rose upon the bush. Bound to be plucked, you know. Couldn't be left to fade in the sun, eh, girls ?

CLARA. Where shall Maggie and me stop whilst the supper is going on, master ? Mistress has not told us yet.

THOMAS. [*Nervously.*] Mistress haven't told you—haven't she? Well—well—at such a time we must all—all rejoice one with t'other, like. No difference made t'wixt master and man. Nor t'wixt maid and missus. Down at the far end of the table you can sit yourselves, my wenches. Up against George—How's that?

CLARA. That will do very well for us, Master.

MAGGIE. I don't expect as missus will let we bide there long.

THOMAS. Look here, my wench, I be master in my own house, and at the asking in marriage of my only sister like, 'tis me as shall say what shall sit down with who. And there's an end of it. That's all.

MAGGIE. I hear them a coming in, master.

[EMILY, *holding the hands of* JESSIE *and* ROBIN, *comes into the room. Her eyes fall on* THOMAS *who is standing between* CLARA *and* MAGGIE, *looking suddenly sheepish and nervous.*

EMILY. [*In a voice of suppressed anger.*] Thomas! O, if I catch any more of these goings on in my kitchen.

[JOAN, *very elegantly dressed and hanging on the arm of* MILES HOOPER, *follows* EMILY *into the room.*

EMILY. I'll not have the food kept back any longer for Luke Jenner. If folk can't come to the time when they're asked, they baint worth waiting for, so sit you down, all of you.

[*She sits down at the head of the table, a child on either side of her.* JOAN *languidly sinks into a chair and* MILES *puts himself at her right. A place at her left remains empty.* THOMAS *sits opposite. Three places at the end of the table are left vacant. As they sit down,* GEORGE, *wearing a new smock and neck handkerchief, comes in.*

EMILY. [*Beginning to help a dish.*] You need not think

you're to be helped first, Clara, for all that the party is given for you, like. The poor little children have been kept waiting a sad time for their supper, first because you was such a while a having your head curled and puffed out, and then 'twas Luke Jenner as didn't come.

[CLARA *sits down at a place at the end of the table.* GEORGE *and* MAGGIE *still remain standing.*

EMILY. [*Perceiving* CLARA'S *movement.*] Well, I never did see anything so forward. Who told you to to sit yourself down along of your betters, if you please, madam serving maid?

[GEORGE *comes involuntarily forward and stands behind* CLARA'S *chair.* CLARA *does not move.*

EMILY. Get you out of that there place this instant, do you hear? [*Turning to* MILES.] To see the way the young person acts one might think as she fancied herself as something uncommon rare and high. But you'll not take any fool in, not you, for all that you like to play the fine lady. Us can see through your game very clear, can't us, Mr. Hooper?

MILES. O certainly, to be sure, Missis Spring. No one who has the privilege of being acquainted with a real lady of quality could be mistook by any of the games played by this young person.

[CLARA *looks him gravely in the face without moving.*

EMILY. Get up, do you hear, and help Maggie pass the dishes!

THOMAS. [*Nervously.*] Nay, nay, 'twas my doing, Emily. I did tell the wenches as they might sit theirselves along of we, just for th' occasion like.

EMILY. And who are you, if you please, giving orders and muddling about like a lord in my kitchen?

THOMAS. [*Faintly.*] Come, Emily, I'm the master.

EMILY. And I, the mistress. Hear that, you piece of London impudence?

GEORGE. [*Comes forward.*] Master Luke be coming up the garden, mistress.

[LUKE JENNER *enters. He goes straight up to* JOAN *and holds out his hand to her, and then to* MILES.

LUKE. I do wish you happiness with all my heart, Miss Clara. Miles, my lad, 'tis rare—rare pleased as I be to shake your hand this day.

EMILY. Come, come, Luke Jenner, you've been and kept us waiting more nor half an hour. Can't you sit yourself down and give other folk a chance of eating their victuals quiet? There's naught to make all this giddle-gaddle about as I can see.

LUKE. [*Sitting down in the empty place by* JOAN'S *side.*] Beg pardon, mistress, I know I'm a bit late. But the victuals as are waited for do have a better flavour to them nor those which be ate straight from the pot like.

THOMAS. That's true 'tis. And 'tis hunger as do make the best sauce.

[GEORGE *and* MAGGIE *quietly seat themselves on either side of* CLARA. EMILY *is too busy dispensing the food to take any notice.* GEORGE *hands plates and dishes to* CLARA, *and silently cares for her comfort throughout the meal.*

THOMAS. Well, Emily; well, Luke. I didn't think to lose my little sister afore she'd stopped a three days in the place. That I did not. But I don't grudge her to a fine prospering young man like friend Hooper, no, I don't.

EMILY. No one called upon you for a speech, Thomas. See if you can't make yourself of some use in passing the green stuff. [*Turning to* LUKE.] We have two serving maids and a man, Mister Jenner, but they're to be allowed to act the quality to-day, so we've got to wait upon ourselves.

LUKE. A man is never so well served as by his own two hands, mistress. That's my saying at home.

THOMAS. And a good one too, Luke, my boy, for

most folk, but with me 'tis otherwise I've got another pair of hands in the place as do for me as well, nor better than my own.

EMILY. Yes, Thomas, I often wonders where you'd be without mine.

THOMAS. I wasn't thinking of yourn, Emily. 'Tis George's hands as I was speaking of.

EMILY. [*Contemptuously.*] George! You'll all find out your mistake one day, Thomas.

MILES. [*To* JOAN, *who has been nervously handling her knife and fork and watching* CLARA'S *movements furtively.*] My sweet Miss is not shewing any appetite.

JOAN. I'm—I'm not used to country fare.

EMILY. O, I hear you, Clara. Thomas, this is very fine. Clara can't feed 'cause she's not used to country fare! What next, I'd like to know!

ROBIN. [*Who has been watching* JOAN.] Why does Aunt sometimes put her knife in her mouth, Mother?

MILES. My good boy, 'tis plain you've never mixed among the quality or you would know that each London season has its own new fashion of acting. This summer 'tis the stylish thing to put on a countryfied mode at table.

JESSIE. Joan don't eat like that, Mister Hooper.

MILES. Joan's only a maid servant, Miss Jessie. You should learn to distinguish between such people and fine ladies like your aunt.

JOAN. [*Forcing herself to be more animated.*] Give me some fruit, Miles—I have no appetite to-day for heavy food. 'Tis far too warm.

MILES. As for me, the only food I require is the sweet honey of my Missy's voice.

THOMAS. Ah, 'tis a grand thing to be a young man, Miles Hooper. There was a day when such things did come handy to my tongue, like.

EMILY. [*Sharply.*] I don't seem to remember that day, Thomas.

THOMAS. [*Sheepishly, his look falling.*] Ah—'twas afore—afore our courting time, Emily.

LUKE. [*Energetically.*] Prime weather for the hay, farmer. I count as this dry will last until the whole of it be carried. [*A knock is heard at the door.*

THOMAS. Now who'll that be ? Did you see anyone a-coming up the path, Mother ?

EMILY. Do you expect me to be carving of the fowls and a-looking out of the window the same time, Thomas ?

THOMAS. George, my lad, do you open the door and see who 'tis.

[JOAN *looks anxiously across the table at* CLARA. *Then she drops her spoon and fork and takes up her fan, using it violently whilst* GEORGE *slowly gets up and opens the door.* LORD LOVEL *is seen standing on the threshold.*

LORD LOVEL. [*To* GEORGE.] Kindly tell me, my man, is this the farm they call Ox Lease ?

GEORGE. Ah, that's right enough.

LORD LOVEL. I'm sorry to break in upon a party like this, but I want to see Miss Clara Spring if she is here.

THOMAS. [*Standing up.*] You've come at the very moment, master. This be a giving in marriage supper. And 'tis Miss Clara, what's only sister to me, as is to be wed.

LORD LOVEL. Impossible, my good sir !

THOMAS. Ah, that's it. Miles Hooper, he's the happy man. If you be come by Painswick High Street you'll have seen his name up over the shop door.

LORD LOVEL. Miss Clara—Miles Hooper—No, I can't believe it.

THOMAS. [*Pointing towards* JOAN *and* MILES.] There they be—the both of them. Turtle doves on the same branch. You're right welcome, master, to sit down along of we as one of the family on this occasion.

LORD LOVEL. [*Looking at* JOAN *who has suddenly dropped her fan and is leaning back with a look of supplication towards* CLARA.] I must have come to the wrong place—that's not the Miss Clara Spring I know.

MILES. [*Bending over* JOAN.] My sweet Missy has no acquaintance with this gentleman, I am sure.

[LORD LOVEL *suddenly turns round and perceives* CLARA *seated by* MAGGIE *at the table. He quickly goes towards her, holding out his hand.*

LORD LOVEL. Miss Clara. Tell me what is going on. [*Looking at her cap and apron.*] Why have you dressed yourself like this ?

THOMAS. Come, come. There seems to be some sort of a hitch here. The young gentleman has very likely stopped a bit too long at the Spotted Cow on his way up.

JOAN. [*Very faintly, looking at* CLARA.] O do you stand by me now.

CLARA. [*Lays her hand on* LORD LOVEL'S *arm.*] Come with me, my lord. I think I can explain everything if you will only step outside with me. Come— [*She leads him swiftly through the door which* GEORGE *shuts behind them.*]

[JOAN *leans back in her chair as though she were going to faint.*

THOMAS. Well, now—but that's a smartish wench, getting him out so quiet, like. George, you'd best step after them to see as the young man don't annoy her in any way.

EMILY. That young person can take good care of herself. Sit you down, Thomas and George, and get on with your eating, if you can.

JESSIE. Why did he think Joan was our aunt, mother ?

EMILY. 'Cause he was in that state when a man don't know his right leg from his left arm.

GEORGE. [*Who has remained standing.*] Look you here, Master Thomas—see here mistress. 'Tis time as there was an end of this cursed play acting, or whatever 'tis called.

EMILY. Play acting there never has been in my house, George, I'd like for you to know.

GEORGE. O yes there have been, mistress. And 'tis

time it was finished. [*Pointing to* JOAN.] You just take and ask that young person what she do mean by tricking herself out in Miss Clara's gowns and what not, and by having herself called by Miss Clara's own name.

MILES. [*Taking* JOAN'S *hand in his.*] My sweet Miss must pay no attention to the common fellow. I dare him to speak like that of my little lady bride.

GEORGE. A jay bird in peacock's feathers, that's what 'tis. And she's took you all in, the every one of you.

JESSIE. O George, isn't she really our aunt from London ?

GEORGE. No, that she baint, Miss Jessie.

THOMAS. Come, come, my lad. I never knew you act so afore.

EMILY. 'Tis clear where he have spent his time this afternoon.

LUKE. Nay, nay, I never did see George inside of the Spotted Cow in all the years I've known of him. George baint made to that shape.

ROBIN. Then who is Aunt Clara, George ?

GEORGE. She who be just gone from out of the room, Master Robin, and none other.

THOMAS. Come, George, this talk do sound so foolish.

GEORGE. I can't help that, master. Foolish deeds do call for foolish words, may be.

MILES. My pretty Miss is almost fainting, I declare. [*He pours out water for* JOAN *and bends affectionately over her.*] Put the drunken fellow outside and let's have an end of this.

GEORGE. [*Advancing.*] Yes, us'll have an end to it very shortly. But I be going to put a straight question to the maid first, and 'tis a straight answer as her'll have to give me in reply.

MILES. Not a word, not a word. Miss is sadly upset by your rude manners.

GEORGE. Do you ask of the young lady but one thing, Master Hooper, and then I'll go when you will.

MILES. Well, my man, what's that ?

GEORGE. Do you get her to speak the name as was given she at baptism, Mister Hooper.

MILES. This is madness. My pretty Miss shall not be teased by such a question. Thomas, you'll have to get this stupid fellow locked up, or something.

GEORGE. [*Angrily.*] Her shall say it, if I stands here all night.

[JOAN *suddenly bends forward and hides her face in her hands, her form shaken by violent weeping. The door opens and* CLARA *enters followed by* LORD LOVEL. *She has taken off her cap and apron.*

JOAN. [*Raising her head and stretching out her hands to* CLARA.] O speak for me, mistress. Speak for me and help.

CLARA. I am Clara, she is Joan. Thomas, Emily, I pray you to forgive us both for taking you in like this.

THOMAS. Well, I never did hear tell of such a thing.

EMILY. I'm not going to believe a word the young person says.

LORD LOVEL. She has told you but the truth, my good friends.

EMILY. And who are you, to put your tongue into the basin, I'd like to know ?

CLARA. This is the nephew of my dear godmother. Lord Lovel is his name.

EMILY. If you think I'm going to be took in with such nonsense, the more fool you, I says.

LORD LOVEL. But all that Miss Clara tells you is true, Missis Spring. She and her serving maid, for certain reasons of their own, agreed to change parts for a few days.

THOMAS. [*Turning to* JOAN.] Is this really so, my maid ?

[JOAN *bows her head, her handkerchief still covering her face.*

THOMAS. [*To* CLARA.] Who ever would have thought on such a thing ?

CLARA. 'Twas a foolish enough thing, but no harm is done. Look up, Joan, and do not cry so pitifully.

JOAN. [*Looking up at* MILES.] You'll never go and change towards me now that we're most as good as wed, will you, Mister Hooper ?

MILES. [*Rising and speaking with cold deliberation.*] Ladies and gentlemen, I have the honour to wish you all a very pleasant evening.

THOMAS. Come, come Miles, we be all a bit turned in the head, it seems. But things'll settle back to their right places if you gives them a chance. Sit you down and take a drink of sommat.

EMILY. Don't be so foolish, Thomas. As if a man what's been stung by a wasp would care to sit himself down on a hornet's nest.

MILES. You are perfectly right, madam. This is no place for me. I have been sported with. My good name has been treated as a jest.

JOAN. O Mister Hooper, 'twas my doing, all of it, but I did it for the best, I did.

MILES. [*Going to the door.*] Thank you, my good woman. Next time you want to play a little prank like this, I beg that you will select your partner with more care. The name of Hooper is not a suitable one to toy with, let me tell you.

ROBIN. Aren't you going to marry her then, Mister Hooper ?

MILES. I am not, Master Robin.

JESSIE. You said as you could tell a real lady by her ways, but you couldn't very well, could he, Mother ?

[MILES, *covering his mortification with sarcastic bows made to the right and left, goes out.* JOAN *leans back almost fainting in her chair.*

LUKE. [*Taking her hand.*] This is the finest hearing in all the world for me, Miss—Miss Joan.

JOAN. O Mr. Jenner, how deep you must despise me.

LUKE. And that I'd never do, though I'm blest if I know why you did it.

CLARA. It was as much my fault as hers, Mister Jenner. There were things that each of us wanted, and

that we thought we might get, by changing places, one with the other.

THOMAS. [*To* CLARA.] Well, my maid, I'm blessed if I do know what you was a hunting about for, dressed up as a serving wench.

CLARA. [*Turning a little towards* GEORGE.] I thought to find something which was mine when I was a little child, but which I lost.

JESSIE. O Georgie do know how to find things which is lost. 'Twas he as brought back the yellow pullet when her had strayed off.

ROBIN. Yes. And 'twas George as did find your blue hair ribbon Aunt Clara, when it was dropped in the hayfield.

JESSIE. I believe as Georgie knowed which of them was our aunt all the time.

ROBIN. I believe it too.

THOMAS. Why, George, you sly dog, what put you on the scent, like?

GEORGE. 'Twas not one, but many things. And if you wants a clear proof [*Turning to* CLARA]—put back the laces of your sleeve, Miss Clara.

CLARA. What for, George?

GEORGE. Whilst you was a-doing of the taters, this morning, you did pull up your sleeves. 'Twas then I held the proof. Not that 'twas needed for me, like.

[CLARA *pushes up both her sleeves, and holds out her arms towards* GEORGE.

GEORGE. [*Pointing to the scar.*] There 'tis—there's where th' old gander have left his mark.

THE CHILDREN. [*Getting up.*] Where, where! O do let us see!

[*They run round to where* CLARA *stands and look eagerly at the mark on her arm which she shews to them.*

THOMAS. George, my lad, you baint th'only one as can play fox.

EMILY. Don't you be so set up as to think as you can, Thomas. For a more foolish figure of a goose never

was cut. A man might tell when 'twas his own sister, if so be as he had his full senses upon him.

THOMAS. Never you mind, Emily. What I says to George is, he baint th'only fox. How now, my lad ?

GEORGE. I don't see what you be driving at, master.

THOMAS. [*Slyly.*] What about that bit of blue ribbon, George ?

CLARA. Yes, Thomas. Ask Georgie if he will give it back to me.

GEORGE. [*Stepping forward till he is by* CLARA'S *side.*] No, and that I will not do. 'Tis little enough as I holds, but what little, I'll keep it.

CLARA. [*To* GEORGE.] Those words are like a frail bridge on which I can stand for a moment. Georgie, do you remember the days when you used to lead me by the hand into the deep parts of the wood, lifting me over the briars and the brambles so that I should not be hurt by their thorns ?

GEORGE. Hark you here, Clara. This once I'll speak. I never had but one true love, and that was a little maid what would run through the woods and over all the meadows, her hand in mine. I learnt she the note of every bird. And when th' evening was come, us would watch together till th' old mother badger did get from out of her hole, and start hunting in the long grasses.

CLARA. [*Taking* GEORGE'S *hand.*] Then, Georgie, there was no need for the disguise that I put upon myself.

GEORGE. Do you think as the moon can hide her light when there baint no cloud upon the sky, Clara ?

CLARA. Georgie, I went in fear of what this gold and silver might raise up between you and me.

THOMAS. That's all finished and done with now, my maid. If I'd a hundred sisters, George should have the pick of them, he should.

EMILY. Thank you. Thomas. One of your sisters is about enough.

LUKE. [*Who has been sitting with* JOAN'S *hand in his.*] Hark you here, mistress. There's many a cloudy

morning turns out a sunshiny day. Baint that a true saying, Joan ?

JOAN. [*Looking up radiantly.*] O that it is, dear Luke.

LORD LOVEL. Miss Clara, it seems that there is nothing more to be said.

EMILY. And that's the most sensible thing as has been spoke this long while. Thomas, your sister favours you in being a poor, grizzling sort of a muddler. She might have took up with this young man, who has a very respectable appearance.

LORD LOVEL. [*Coming forward to* GEORGE *and shaking his hand.*] I'm proud to make your acquaintance, sir.

EMILY. [*Rising angrily.*] Come Thomas, come Luke, come Clara. Us might be a barn full of broody hens the way we be set around of this here table. 'Twill be midnight afore the things is cleared away and washed up.

THOMAS. What if it be, Emily. 'Tisn't very often as I gets the chance of minding how 'twas in times gone past. Ah, I was a young man in those days, too, I was.

EMILY. And 'tis a rare old addle head as you be got now, Thomas.

JESSIE. [*Slipping her hand into* THOMAS'S.] O do let us sit up till midnight, Dad.

ROBIN. I shall eat a smartish lot more if we does.

[*Curtain.*]

MY MAN JOHN

CHARACTERS.

MRS. GARDNER.
WILLIAM, *her son.*
JOHN, *his farm hand.*
SUSAN, *their maid.*
JULIA, *the owner of Luther's Farm.*
LAURA.
CHRIS, NAT, TANSIE, } *gipsies.*

MY MAN JOHN.

ACT I.—Scene 1.

The garden of the Road Farm. To the right an arbour covered with roses. MRS. GARDNER *is seated in it, knitting.* WILLIAM *is tying up flowers and watering them.*

MRS. GARDNER. And you have come to a ripe age when 'tis the plain duty of a man to turn himself towards matrimony, William.

WILLIAM. 'Tis a bit of quiet that I'm after, Mother.

MRS. GARDNER. Quiet! 'tis a good shaking up as you want, William. Why, you have got as set in your ways as last season's jelly.

WILLIAM. Then let me bide so. 'Tis all I ask.

MRS. GARDNER. No, William. I'm got to be an old woman now, and 'tis time that I had someone at my side to help in the house-keeping and to share the work.

WILLIAM. What's Susan for, if 'tisn't to do that?

MRS. GARDNER. Susan? As idle a piece of goods as ever was seen on a summer's day! No. 'Tisn't a serving maid that I was thinking of, but someone who should be of more account in the house. 'Tis a daughter that I'm wanting, William, and I've picked out the one who is to my taste.

WILLIAM. Then you've done more than I have, Mother.

MRS. GARDNER. 'Tis the young person whom Luther Smith has left his farm and all his money to. I've got my eye on her for you, William.

WILLIAM. Then you'll please to put your eye somewhere else, Mother, for I've seen them, and they don't suit me.

MRS. GARDNER. Come, this is news, William. Pray where did you meet ?

WILLIAM. 'Twas when I was in church last Sunday. In they came, the two young maids from Luthers, like a couple of gallinie fowls, the way they did step up over the stones and shake the plumes of them this way and that. I don't hold with fancy tricks. I never could abide them. No foreign wenches for me. And that's about all.

MRS. GARDNER. 'Tis true they are from town, but none the worse for that, William. You have got sadly rude and cumbersome in your ways, or you wouldn't feel as you do towards a suitable young person. 'Tis from getting about with John so much, I think.

WILLIAM. Now look you here, Mother, I've got used to my own ways, and when a man's got set in his own ways, 'tis best to leave him there. I'm past the age for marrying, and you ought to know this better than anyone.

MRS. GARDNER. I know that 'tis a rare lot of foolishness that you do talk, William, seeing as you're not a year past thirty yet. But if you can't be got to wed for love of a maid, perhaps you'll do so for love of a purse, when 'tis fairly filled.

WILLIAM. There's always been enough for you and me so far, Mother.

MRS. GARDNER. Ah, but that won't last for ever. I'm got an old woman, and I can't do with the dairy nor the poultry as I was used to do. And things have not the same prices to them as 'twas a few years gone by. And last year's season was the worst that I remember.

WILLIAM. So 'twas. But so long as there's a roof over our heads and a loaf of bread and a bit of garden for me to work on, where's the harm, Mother ?

MRS. GARDNER. O you put me out of all patience, William. Where's the rent to come from if we go on

like this? And the clothing, and the food? And John's wages, and your flower seeds, if it comes to that, for you have got terrible wasteful over the flowers.

WILLIAM. I wish you'd take it quieter, Mother. Look at yon bed of musk, 'tis a grand smell that comes up from it all around.

MRS. GARDNER. No, William. I've no eye for musk, nor nose to smell at it either till you've spoken the word that I require.

WILLIAM. Best let things bide as they are, Mother.

MRS. GARDNER. I'll leave you no rest till you do as I wish, William. I'm got an old woman, and 'tis hard I should be denied in aught that I've set my heart upon.

WILLIAM. Please to set it upon something different, Mother, for I'm not a marrying man, and John he'll tell you the same thing.

MRS. GARDNER. John! I'm sick of the very name of him. I can't think how 'tis that you can lower yourself by being so close with a common farm hand, William.

WILLIAM. Ah, 'twould be a rare hard matter to find the equal to John, Mother. 'Tis of gold all through, and every bit of him, that he is made. You don't see many like John these days, that's the truth.

MRS. GARDNER. Well, then, John, won't be here much longer, for we shan't have anything to give him if things go on like this.

WILLIAM. I'd wed forty wives sooner than lose John —and that I would.

MRS. GARDNER. I'm not asking you to wed forty. 'Tis only one.

WILLIAM. And that one?

MRS. GARDNER. The young person who's got Luther's farm. Her name is Julia.

WILLIAM. [*Leaving his flower border and walking up and down thoughtfully.*] Would she be the one with the cherry colour ribbons to her gown?

MRS. GARDNER. I'm sure I don't know. I was not at church last Sunday.

WILLIAM. Or t'other one in green?

MRS. GARDNER. You appear to have used your eyes pretty well, William.

WILLIAM. O, I can see a smartish bit about me when I choose.

MRS. GARDNER. T'other wench is but the housekeeper.

WILLIAM. Where did you get that from ?

MRS. GARDNER. 'Twas Susan who told me. She got it off someone down in the village.

WILLIAM. Well, which of the maids would have had the cherry-coloured ribbons to her, Mother ?

MRS. GARDNER. I'm sure I don't know, but if you go up there courting this afternoon, may happen that you'll find out.

WILLIAM. This afternoon ? O, that's much too sudden like.

MRS. GARDNER. Not a bit of it. Recollect, your fancy has been set on her since Sunday.

WILLIAM. Come, Mother, you can't expect a man to jump into the river all of a sudden like this.

MRS. GARDNER. I expect you to go up there this very day and to commence telling her of your feelings.

WILLIAM. But I've got no feelings that I can tell her of, Mother.

MRS. GARDNER. Then you'll please to find some, William.

WILLIAM. 'Tis a thing that in all my life I've never done as to go visiting of a strange wench of an afternoon.

MRS. GARDNER. Then 'tis time you did begin.

WILLIAM. And what's more, I'll not do it, neither.

MRS. GARDNER. Then I must tell John that we have no further need of his services, for where the money to pay him is to come from, I don't know.

[*She rolls up her knitting and rises.*

WILLIAM. Stop a moment, Mother—stop a moment. Maybe 'twon't be so bad when I've got more used to the idea. You've pitched it upon me so sudden like.

MRS. GARDNER. Rent day has pitched upon me more sudden, William.

WILLIAM. Look you, Mother, I'll get and turn it about in my mind a bit. And, maybe, I'll talk it over with John. I can't do more, can I now ?

MRS. GARDNER. Talk it over with whom you please, William. But remember 'tis this very afternoon that you have to start courting. I've laid your best clothes out all ready on your bed.

WILLIAM. [*Sighing heavily.*] O then I count there's no way out of it. But how am I to bring it off ? 'Tis that I'd like to know.

MRS. GARDNER. Maybe your man will be able to give you some suitable advice. Such things are beyond me, I'm afraid.

[*She gathers up her work things, and with a contemptuous look at her son, she goes slowly out of the garden.*

[WILLIAM *remains on the path lost in perturbed thought. Suddenly he goes to the gate and calls loudly.*

WILLIAM. John, John!

JOHN. [*From afar.*] Yes, master.

WILLIAM. [*Calling.*] Come you here, John, as quick as you can run.

JOHN. That I will, master.

[JOHN *hurries into the garden.*

WILLIAM. John, I'm powerful upset.

JOHN. Mistress's fowls bain't got among the flowers again, be they, Master William ?

WILLIAM. No, no, John. 'Tisn't so bad as that. But I'm in a smartish fix, I can tell you.

JOHN. How's that, master ?

WILLIAM. John, did you ever go a'courting ?

JOHN. Well, master, that's a thing to ask a man !

WILLIAM. 'Tis a terrible serious matter, John. Did you ever go ?

JOHN. Courting ?

WILLIAM. Yes.

JOHN. Why, I count as I have went a score of times, master.

WILLIAM. A score of times, John! But that was before you were got to the age you are now?

JOHN. Before that, and now, master.

WILLIAM. And now, John?

JOHN. To be sure, master.

WILLIAM. Then you know how 'tis done?

JOHN. Ah, that I does, master.

WILLIAM. Well, John, you're the man for me.

JOHN. Lord bless us, master, but what have you to do with courting?

WILLIAM. You may well ask me, John. Why, look you here—until this very morning, you would say I was a quiet and a peaceable man, with the right place for everything and everything in its place.

JOHN. Ah, and that you was, Master William. And a time for all things too, and a decenter, proper gentleman no man ever served—that's truth.

WILLIAM. Ah, John—the mistress has set her will to change all this.

JOHN. Now, you'd knock me down with a feather.

WILLIAM. That she has, John. I've got to set out courting—a thing I've never thought to do in all my living days.

JOHN. That I'll be bound you have not, Master William, though a finer gentleman than yourself is not to be found in all the country side.

WILLIAM. [*With shy eagerness.*] Is that how I appear to you, John?

JOHN. Ah, and that you does, master. And 'tis the wonder with all for miles around as how you've been and kept yourself to yourself like this, so many years.

WILLIAM. Well, John, it appears that I'm to pass out of my own keeping. My Sunday clothes are all laid out upon the bed.

JOHN. Bless my soul, Master William, and 'tis but Thursday too.

WILLIAM. Isn't that a proper day for this sort of business, John?

JOHN. I've always been used to Saturday myself, but with a gentleman 'tis different like.

WILLIAM. Well, John, there's nothing in this day or that as far as I can see. A bad job is a bad job, no matter what, and the day of it does make but very little difference.

JOHN. You're right there, master. But if I may be so bold, where is it as you be going off courting this afternoon ?

WILLIAM. Ah—now you and me will have a straight talk one with another—for 'tis to you I look, John, for to pull me out of this fix where the mistress has gone and put me.

JOHN. And that I'll do, master—with all the will in the world.

WILLIAM. Well then, John, 'tis to be one of those maids from strange parts who are come to live at old Luther's, up yonder.

JOHN. Ah, I seed the pair of them in church last Sunday. Fine maids, the both of them, and properly suitable if you was to ask me.

WILLIAM. 'Tis only the one I've got to court, John.

JOHN. And I reckon that's one too many, Master William.

WILLIAM. You're right there, John. 'Tis Mistress Julia I've to go at.

JOHN. And which of the pair would that be, Master William ?

WILLIAM. That one with the cherry colour ribbons to her gown, I believe.

JOHN. Ah, t'other was plainer in her dressing, and did keep the head of her bent smartish low on her book, so that a man couldn't get a fair look upon she.

WILLIAM. That would be the housekeeper or summat. 'Tis Julia, who has the old man's money, I'm to court.

JOHN. Well, master, I'll come along with you a bit of the road, to keep your heart up like.

WILLIAM. You must do more than that for me, John.

You've got to learn me how the courting is done before I set off.

JOHN. Why, master, courting baint a thing what wants much learning, that's the truth.

WILLIAM. 'Tis all new to me, John. I'm blessed if I know how to commence. Why, the thought of it at once sends me hot all over ; and then as cold again.

JOHN. You start and get your clothes on, master. 'Tis half the battle—clothes. What a man cannot bring out of his mouth of a Saturday will fall out easy as anything on the Sunday with his best coat to his back.

WILLIAM. No, John. The clothes won't help me in this fix. You must tell me how to start once I get to the farm and am by the door.

JOHN. You might take a nosegay with you, master.

WILLIAM. I might. And yet, 'tis a pity to cut the blooms for naught.

JOHN. I always takes a nosegay with me, of a Saturday night.

WILLIAM. Why, John, who is it that you are courting then ?

JOHN. 'Tis that wench Susan, since you ask me, master. But not a word of it to th' old mistress.

WILLIAM. I'll not mention it, John.

JOHN. Thank you kindly, master.

WILLIAM. And now, John, when the nosegay's all gathered and the flowers bunched, what else should I do ?

JOHN. Well, then you gives it her when you gets to the door. And very like she'll ask you into the parlour, seeing as you be a particular fine looking gentleman.

WILLIAM. I could not stand that, John. I've no tongue to me within a strange house.

JOHN. Well then, maybe as you and she will sit aside of one another in an arbour in the garden, or sommat of the sort.

WILLIAM. Yes, John. And what next ?

JOHN. I'm blessed if I do know, master. You go along and commence.

WILLIAM. No, John, and that I won't. Not till I know more about it like.

JOHN. Well, master, I'm fairly puzzled hard to tell you.

WILLIAM. I have the very thought, John. Do you bring Susan out here. I'll place myself behind the shrubs, and do you get and court her as well as you know how; and maybe that will learn me something.

JOHN. Susan's a terrible hard wench to court, Master William.

WILLIAM. 'Twill make the better lesson, John.

JOHN. 'Tis a stone in place of a heart what Susan's got.

WILLIAM. 'Twill very likely be the same with Julia. Go and bring her quickly, John.

[WILLIAM *places himself behind the arbour.*

JOHN. As you will, master—but Susan have been wonderful nasty in her ways with me of late. 'Tis my belief as she have took up with one of they low gipsy lads what have been tenting up yonder, against the wood.

WILLIAM. Well, 'twill be your business to win her back to you, John. See—am I properly hid, behind the arbour?

JOHN. Grandly hid, master—I'll go and fetch the wench. [JOHN *leaves the garden.*

[WILLIAM *remains hidden behind the arbour. After a few minutes* JOHN *returns pulling* SUSAN *by the hand.*

SUSAN. And what are you about, bringing me into master's flower garden at this time of the morning? I should like for mistress to look out of one of the windows—you'd get into fine trouble, and me too, John.

JOHN. Susan, my dear, you be a passing fine wench to look upon, and that's the truth.

SUSAN. And is it to tell me such foolishness that you've brought me all the way out of the kitchen?

JOHN. [*Stooping and picking a dandelion.*] And to give you this flower, dear Susan.

SUSAN. [*Throwing it down.*] A common thing like that! I'll have none of it.

JOHN. 'Tis prime you looks when you be angered, Susan. The blue fire do fairly leap from your eyes.

SUSAN. O you're enough to anger a saint, John. What have you brought me here for?

JOHN. I thought I'd like to tell you as you was such a fine wench, Susan. And that I did never see a finer.

SUSAN. You do look at me as though I was yonder prize heifer what Master William's so powerful set on.

JOHN. Ah—and 'tis true as you have sommat of the look of she when you stands a pawing of the ground as you be now.

SUSAN. Is it to insult me that you've got me away from the kitchen, John?

JOHN. Nay—'tis to tell you that you be a rare smartish wench—and I'll go along to the church with you any day as you will name, my dear.

SUSAN. That you won't, John. I don't mind taking a nosegay of flowers from you now and then, and hearing you speak nice to me over the garden gate of an evening, but I'm not a-going any further along the road with you. That's all. [*She moves towards the house.*

JOHN. Now, do you bide a moment longer, Susan—and let me say sommat of all they feelings which be stirring like a nest of young birds in my heart for you.

SUSAN. They may stir within you like an old waspes nest for all I care, John.

JOHN. Come, Susan, put better words to your tongue nor they. You can speak honey sweet when it do please you to.

SUSAN. 'Tis mustard as is the right food for you this morning, John.

JOHN. I gets enough of that from mistress—I mean—well—I mean—[*in a loud, clear voice*]—O mistress is a wonderful fine woman and no mistake.

SUSAN. You won't say as much when she comes round the corner and catches you a wasting of your time like this, John.

JOHN. Is it a waste of time to stand a-drinking in the sweetness of the finest rose what blooms, Susan ?

SUSAN. Is that me, John ?

JOHN. Who else should it be, Susan ?

SUSAN. Well, John—sometimes I think there's not much amiss with you.

JOHN. O Susan, them be grand words.

SUSAN. But then again—I do think as you be getting too much like Master William.

JOHN. And a grander gentleman than he never went upon the earth.

SUSAN. Cut and clipped and trimmed and dry as that box tree yonder. And you be getting sommat of the same fashion about you, John.

JOHN. Then make me differenter, Susan, you know the way.

SUSAN. I'm not so sure as I do, John.

JOHN. Wed me come Michaelmas, Susan.

SUSAN. And that I'll not. And what's more, I'm not a-going to stop here talking foolish with you any longer. I've work to do within. [SUSAN *goes off.*

[JOHN, *mopping his face and speaking regretfully as* WILLIAM *steps from behind the arbour.*

JOHN. There, master. That's courting for you. That's the sort of thing. And a caddling thing it is too.

WILLIAM. But 'tis a thing that you do rare finely and well, John. And 'tis you and none other who shall do the job for me this afternoon, there—that's what I've come to in my thoughts.

JOHN. Master, master, whatever have you got in your head now ?

WILLIAM. See here, John—we'll cut a nosegay for you to carry—some of the best blooms I'll spare. And you, who know what courting is, and who have such fine words to your tongue, shall step up at once and do the business for me.

JOHN. Master, if 'twas an acre of stone as you'd asked me to plough, I'd sooner do it nor a job like this.

WILLIAM. John, you've been a good friend to me all the years that you have lived on the farm, you'll not go and fail me now.

JOHN. Why not court the lady with your own tongue, Master William. 'Twould have better language to it nor what I can give the likes of she.

WILLIAM. Your words are all right, John. 'Tisn't as though sensible speech was needed. You do know what's wanted with the maids, whilst I have never been used to them in any way whatever. So let's say no more about it, but commence gathering the flowers.

JOHN. [*Heavily, but resigned.*] Since you say so, master. [*They begin to gather flowers.*

WILLIAM. What blooms do young maids like the best, John ?

JOHN. Put in a sprig of thyme, master.

WILLIAM. Yes—I can well spare that.

JOHN. And a rose that's half opened, master.

WILLIAM. It goes to my heart to have a rose wasted on this business, John.

JOHN. 'Tain't likely as you can get through courtship without parting with sommat, master. Lucky if it baint gold as you're called upon to spill.

WILLIAM. That's true, John—I'll gather the rose—

JOHN. See here, master, the lily and the pink. Them be brave flowers, the both of them, and with a terrible fine scent coming out of they.

WILLIAM. Put them into the nosegay, John—And now—no more—'Tis enough waste for one day.

JOHN. 'Tis a smartish lot of blooms as good as done for, says I.

WILLIAM. A slow sowing and a quick reaping, John.

JOHN. 'Tis to be hoped as 'twill be the same with the lady, master.

WILLIAM. There, off you go, John. And mind, 'tis her with the cherry ribbon to her gown and bonnet.

JOHN. Why, master, and her might have a different ribbon to her head this day, being that 'tis Thursday ?

WILLIAM. An eye like—like a bullace, John. And a grand colour to the face of her like yon rose.

JOHN. That's enough, Master William. I'll not pitch upon the wrong maid, never fear. And now I'll clean myself up a bit at the pump, and set off straight away.

WILLIAM. [*Shaking* JOHN'S *hand.*] Good luck to you, my man. And if you can bring it off quiet and decent like without me coming in till at the last, why, 'tis a five pound note that you shall have for your trouble.

JOHN. You be a grand gentleman to serve, Master William, and no mistake about that.

[*Curtain.*]

ACT II.—Scene 1.

A wood. To the right a fallen tree (*or a bench*). JOHN *comes from the left, a large bunch of flowers in his hand.*

JOHN. Out, and a taking of the air in the wood, be they? Well, bless my soul, but 'tis a rare caddling business what master's put upon I. 'Tis worse nor any job he have set me to in all the years I've been along of him, so 'tis. But I'm the one to bring it off slick and straight, and, bless me, if I won't take and hide myself by yon great bush till I see the wenches a-coming up. That'll give me time to have a quiet look at the both and pick out she what master's going a-courting of.

[JOHN *puts himself behind some thick bushes as* JULIA *and* LAURA *come forward.* JULIA *is very simply dressed. Her head is bare, and she is carrying her white cotton sunbonnet.* LAURA *wears finer clothes and her bonnet is tied by bright ribbons of cherry colour.*

LAURA. [*Stopping by the bench.*] We'll sit down—'Tis a warm day, and I've had enough of walking.

[*She sinks down on the seat.*

JULIA. [*Looking all round her.*] 'Tis beautiful and quiet here. O this is ever so much better than the farm.

LAURA. The farm! What's wrong with that, I should like to know?

JULIA. Everything. 'Tis more like a prison than a home to me. Within the house there's always work crying out to be done—and outside I believe 'tis worse—work—nothing else speaking to me.

LAURA. You're a sad ungrateful girl. Why, there's many would give their eyes to change with you.

JULIA. But out here 'tis all peace, and freedom. There's naught calling out to be done. The flowers grow as they like, and the breezes move them this way, and that. The ground is thick with leaves and blossoms and no one has got to sweep it, and the hard things with great noises to them, like pails and churns, are far away and clean forgot.

LAURA. 'Tisn't much use as you'll be on the farm.

JULIA. I wish I'd never come nigh to it. I was happier far before.

LAURA. 'Tis a grand life. You'll see it as I do one of these days.

JULIA. No, that I shall not. Every day that I wake and hear the cattle lowing beneath my window I turn over on my pillow, and 'tis a heart of lead that turns with me. The smell of the wild flowers in the fields calls me, but 'tis to the dairy I must go, to work. And at noonday, when the shade of the woodland makes me thirsty for its coolness, 'tis the kitchen I must be in—or picking green stuff for the market. And so on till night, when the limbs of me can do no more and the spirit in me is like a bird with the wing of it broken.

LAURA. You'll harden to it all by winter time right enough.

JULIA. O I'll never harden to it. 'Tis not that way I am made. Some girls can set themselves down with

four walls round them, and do their task nor ask for anything beyond, but 'tis not so with me.

LAURA. How is it then with you ?

JULIA. [*Pointing.*] There—see that blue thing yonder flying from one blossom to another. That's how 'tis with me. Shut me up close in one place, I perish. Let me go free, and I can fly and live.

LAURA. You do talk a powerful lot of foolishness that no one could understand.

JULIA. O, do not let us talk at all. Let us bide still, and get ourselves refreshed by the sweetness and the wildness of the forest.

[JULIA *turns away and gives herself up to the enjoyment of the wood around her.* LAURA *arranges her ribbons and smoothes out her gown. Neither of them speak for a few minutes.*

LAURA. [*Looking up and pointing.*] See those strange folk over there ? What are they ?

JULIA. [*Looking in the same direction.*] I know them. They are gipsies from the hill near to us.

LAURA. They should be driven away then. I don't like such folk roosting around.

JULIA. But I do. They are friends to me. Many's the time I have run out at dusk to speak with them as they sit round their fire.

LAURA. Then you didn't ought to have done so. Let's get off now, before they come up.

JULIA. No, no. Let us talk to them all. [*Calling.*] Tansie and Chris, come you here and sit down alongside of us. [CHRIS, NAT, *and* TANSIE *come up.*

CHRIS. Good morning to you, mistress. 'Tis a fine brave day, to-day.

JULIA. That it is, Chris. There never was so fine a day. And we have come to spend all of it in this forest.

TANSIE. Ah, but 'tis warm upon the high road.

NAT. We be come right away from the town, mistress.

JULIA. Then sit down, all of you, and we will talk in the cool shade.

LAURA. Not here, if you please. I am not used to such company.

JULIA. Not here? Very well, my friends, let us go further into the wood and you shall stretch yourselves under the green trees and we will all rest there together.

LAURA. Well, what next! You might stop to consider how 'twill look in the parish.

JULIA. How what will look?

LAURA. How 'twill look for you to be seen going off in such company like this.

JULIA. The trees have not eyes, nor have the grass, and flowers. There's no one to see me but you, and you can turn your head t'other way. Come Tansie, come Chris. [*She turns towards the three gipsies.*

TANSIE. Nat's in a sorry way, this morning—baint you, Nat?

NAT. Let I be. You do torment anyone till they scarce do know if they has senses to them or no.

TANSIE. You're not one to miss what you never had, Nat.

CHRIS. Let the lad bide in quiet, will you. 'Tis a powerful little nagging wench as you be.

JULIA. Why are you heavy and sad this fine day, Nat?

TANSIE. 'Tis love what's the matter with he, mistress.

JULIA. Love? O, that's not a thing that should bring heaviness or gloom, but lightness to the heart, and song to the lips.

TANSIE. Ah, but when there's been no meeting in the dusk since Sunday, and no message sent!

CHRIS. Keep that tongue of your'n where it should be, and give over, Tansie. Susan's not one as would play tricks with her lad.

JULIA. Now I have a thirst to hear all about this, Nat, so come off further into the wood, all of you, where we can speak in quiet.

[*She holds out her hand to* NAT.

LAURA. Upon my word, but something must be done to bring these goings on to an end.

JULIA. Come, Nat— you shall tell me all your trouble. I understand the things of the heart better than Tansie, and I shall know how to give you comfort in your distress—come!

[JULIA *and* NAT, *followed by* CHRIS *and* TANSIE, *move off out of sight.* LAURA *is left sitting on the bench alone. Presently* JOHN *comes out carefully from behind the bushes, holding his bunch of flowers.*

JOHN. A good day to you, mistress.

LAURA. The same to you, master.

JOHN. Folks do call me John.

LAURA. Indeed? Good morning, John.

JOHN. A fine brave sun to-day, mistress.

LAURA. But pleasant enough here in the shade.

JOHN. Now, begging your pardon, but what you wants over the head of you baint one of these great trees full of flies and insects, but an arbour trailed all about with bloom, such as my master has down at his place yonder.

LAURA. Indeed? And who may your master be, John?

JOHN. 'Tis Master William Gardner, what's the talk of the country for miles around, mistress. And that he be.

LAURA. Master William Gardner! What, he of Road Farm?

JOHN. The very same, mistress. And as grand a gentleman as anyone might wish for to see.

LAURA. Yes—I seem to have heard something told about him, but I don't rightly remember what 'twas.

JOHN. You may have heard tell as the finest field of beans this season, that's his.

LAURA. I don't think 'twas of beans that I did hear.

JOHN. Or that 'twas his spotted hilt what fetched the highest price of any in the market Saturday?

LAURA. No, 'twasn't that neither.

JOHN. Or that folks do come as thick as flies on a

summer's day from all parts of the country for to buy the wheat what he do grow. Ah, and before 'tis cut or like to be, they be a fighting for it, all of them, like a pack of dogs with a bone. So 'tis.

LAURA. 'Twasn't that, I don't think.

JOHN. Or 'twas that th' old missis—she as is mother to Master William—her has a tongue what's sharper nor longer than any vixen's going. But that's between you and I, missis.

LAURA. Ah—'Twas that I did hear tell of. Now I remember it.

JOHN. But Master William—the tongue what he do keep be smooth as honey, and a lady might do as she likes with him if one got the chance.

LAURA. Indeed? He must be a pleasant sort of a gentleman.

JOHN. For he could be led with kindness same as anything else. But try for to drive him, as old Missis do—and very likely 'tis hoofed as you'll get for your pains.

LAURA. I like a man with some spirit to him, myself.

JOHN. Ah, Master William has a rare spirit to him, and that he has. You should hear him when th' old Missis's fowls be got into his flower garden. 'Tis sommat as is not likely to be forgot in a hurry. That 'tisn't.

LAURA. You carry a handsome nosegay of blossoms there, John. Are they from your master's garden?

JOHN. Ah, there're not amiss. I helped for to raise they too.

LAURA. And to whom are you taking them now, John?

JOHN. To the lady what my master's a-courting of, mistress.

LAURA. And whom may that be, John?

JOHN. Why, 'tis yourself, mistress.

LAURA. Me, John? Why, I've never clapped eyes on Master William Gardner so far as I know of.

JOHN. But he've clapped eyes on you, mistress—'twas at Church last Sunday. And 'tis not a bit of

food, nor a drop of drink, nor an hour of sleep, as Master William have taken since.

LAURA. O, you do surprise me, John ?

JOHN. That's how 'tis with he, mistress. 'Tis many a year as I've served Master William—but never have I seen him in the fix where he be in to-day.

LAURA. Why—how is it with him then ?

JOHN. As it might be with the cattle when the flies do buzz about they, thick in the sunshine. A-lashing this way and that, a-trampling and a-tossing, and never a minute's rest.

LAURA. Well, now—to think of such a thing. Indeed !

JOHN. I've seen a horse right up to the neck of him in that old quag ahind of our place—a-snorting and a-clapping with his teeth and a-plunging so as 'twould terrify anyone to harken to it. And that's how 'tis to-day with Master William up at home, so 'tis.

LAURA. And only saw me once—at Church last Sunday, John ?

JOHN. Ah—and they old maid flies do sting but once, but 'tis a terrible big bump as they do raise on the flesh of anyone, that 'tis.

LAURA. O John—'tis a fine thing to be loved like that.

JOHN. So I should say—ah, 'tisn't every day that a man like Master William goes a-courting.

LAURA. But he hasn't set out yet, John.

JOHN. You take and hold the nosegay, mistress, and I'll go straight off and fetch him, so being as you're agreeable.

LAURA. O yes, and that I am, John—You go and fetch him quick. I'll bide here gladly, waiting till he comes.

JOHN. That's it. I knowed you for a sensible lady the moment I pitched my eyes on to you. And when master do come up, you take and talk to him nicely and meek-like and lead him on from one thing to t'other : and you'll find as he'll go quiet as a sheep after the first set off, spite of the great spirit what's at the heart of he.

LAURA. John, I'll do all as you say, and more than all. Only, you get along and send him quickly to me. And—yes, you might give him a good hint, John—I'm not averse to his attentions.

JOHN. Ah, and I should think you wasn't, for 'twould be a hard job to find a nicer gentleman nor Master William.

LAURA. That I know it would. Why, John, my heart's commenced beating ever so fast, it has.

JOHN. Then you may reckon how 'tis with the poor master! Why, 'tis my belief as 'twill be raving madness as'll be the end of he if sommat don't come to put a finish to this unrest.

LAURA. O John, 'twould never do for such a fine gentleman to go crazy. Do you set off quick and send him along to me, and I'll take and do my very best for to quiet him, like.

JOHN. [*Rising and about to set off.*] Ah, 'tis a powerful lot of calming as Master William do require. But you be the one for to give it him. You just bide where you do sit now whilst I goes and fetches him, mistress.

LAURA. O that I will, my good, dear John.

Curtain.

ACT II.—Scene 2.

The same wood.

WILLIAM *and* JOHN *come up.* WILLIAM *carries a large market basket containing vegetables.*

JOHN. [*Looking round and seeing no one.*] Bless my soul, but 'twas on the seat as I did leave she.

WILLIAM. We have kept her waiting a bit too long whilst we were cutting the green stuff. And now 'twill be best to let matters bide over till to-morrow.

JOHN. Why, master 'tis my belief as you be all of a-tremble like.

WILLIAM. I wish we were well out of this business, John. 'Tis not to my liking in any way.

JOHN. 'Tis a fine looking lady, and that 'tis. You take and court her, Master William.

WILLIAM. How am I to court the wench when she's not here?

JOHN. [*Pointing.*] Look yonder, master, there she comes through them dark trees.

WILLIAM. You've got to bide somewhere nigh me, John. I could not be left alone with a wench who's a stranger to me.

JOHN. Don't you get flustered, Master William. See here, I'll hide me ahind of yon bushes, and if so be as you should want me, why, there I'm close at hand.

WILLIAM. I'd rather you did stand at my side, John.

[JOHN *hides himself behind the bushes.* LAURA *comes slowly up.* WILLIAM *stands awkwardly before her, saying nothing. Presently he takes off his hat and salutes her clumsily and she bows to him. For some moments they stand embarrassed, looking at one another.*

WILLIAM. [*Suddenly bringing out a bunch of carrots from his basket and holding them up.*] See these young carrots, mistress.

LAURA. Indeed I do, master.

WILLIAM. 'Tisn't everywhere that you do see such fine grown ones for the time of year.

LAURA. You're right there, master. We have none of them up at our place.

WILLIAM. [*Holding them towards her.*] Then be pleased to accept these, mistress.

LAURA. [*Taking the carrots.*] Thank you kindly, master. [*There is another embarrassed silence.* WILLIAM *looks distractedly from* LAURA *to his basket. Then he takes out a bunch of turnips.*

WILLIAM. You couldn't beat these nowhere, not if you were to try.

LAURA. I'm sure you could not, master.

WILLIAM. They do call this sort the Early Snowball. 'Tis a foolish name for a table root.

LAURA. 'Tis a beautiful turnip.

WILLIAM. [*Giving her the bunch.*] You may as well have them too.

LAURA. O you're very kind, master.

[*There is another long silence.* WILLIAM *shuffles on his feet*—LAURA *bends admiringly over her gifts.*

WILLIAM. There's young beans and peas and a spring cabbage too, within the basket. I do grow a little of most everything.

LAURA. O shall we sit down and look at the vegetables together ?

WILLIAM. [*Visibly relieved.*] We might do worse nor that. [*They sit down side by side with the basket between them.*

LAURA. [*Lifting the cabbage.*] O, this is quite a little picture ! See how the leaves do curl backwards—so fresh and green !

WILLIAM. Ah, and that one has a rare white heart to it, it has.

LAURA. I do love the taste of a spring cabbage, when it has a slice of fat bacon along with it.

WILLIAM. I might have brought a couple of pounds with me if I'd have thought. Mother do keep some rare mellow jowls a-hanging in the pantry.

LAURA. [*Shyly.*] Next time, maybe.

WILLIAM. [*Eagerly.*] 'Twouldn't take ten minutes for me to run back.

LAURA. Not now—O no master—not now. Do you bide a little longer here and tell me about—about t'other things in the basket.

WILLIAM. [*Mopping his face with a handkerchief.*] Well—there's the beans—I count that yours haven't come up very smart this year.

LAURA. That they've not. The whole place has been let to run dreadful wild.

WILLIAM. I'd—I'd like to show you how 'tis in my garden, one of these days.

LAURA. I'd be very pleased to walk along with you there.

WILLIAM. [*Hurriedly.*] Ah—you should see it later on when the—the—the parsnips are a bit forrarder.

LAURA. I'd like to see the flower garden now, where this nosegay came from.

WILLIAM. [*Looking round uneasily.*] I don't know what the folks would say if they were to see you and me a-going on the road in broad day—I'm sure I don't.

LAURA. Why, what should they say, Master Gardner?

WILLIAM. They might get saying—they might say as—as I'd got a-courting, or sommat foolish.

LAURA. Well—and would that be untrue?

WILLIAM. [*Looking at her very uncomfortably.*] I'm blessed if I do know—I mean—

LAURA. This nosegay—and look, those young carrots —and the turnips and beans, why did you bring them for me, master, unless it was that you intended something by it?

WILLIAM. [*Very confused.*] That's so. So 'tis. That's true. I count you have got hold of the sow by the ear right enough this time. And the less said about it the better. [*A slight silence.*

LAURA. [*Looking up shyly in* WILLIAM'S *face.*] What was it drew you to me first, master?

WILLIAM. I believe 'twas in Church on Sunday that I chanced to take notice of you, like.

LAURA. Yes, but what was it about me that took your fancy in Church on Sunday?

WILLIAM. I'm blessed if I know, unless 'twas those coloured ribbons that you have got to your bonnet.

LAURA. You are partial to the colour?

WILLIAM. Ah, 'tis well enough.

LAURA. See here. [*Taking a flower from her dress.*] This is of the same colour. I will put it in your coat.

[*She fastens it in his coat.* WILLIAM *looks very uncomfortable and nervous.*

WILLIAM. Well, bless my soul, but women folk have got some powerful strange tricks to them.

LAURA. [*Pinning the flower in its place.*] There—my gift to you, master.

WILLIAM. You may call me by my name, if you like, 'tis more suitable, seeing that we might go along to Church together one of these days.

LAURA. O William, you have made me very happy—I do feel all mazy like with my gladness.

WILLIAM. Well, Julia, we might do worse than to—to —name the day.

LAURA. Why do you call me Julia ?

WILLIAM. Seeing that I've given you leave to call me William 'tis only suitable that I should use your name as well.

LAURA. But my name is not Julia.

WILLIAM. What is it then, I should like to know ?

LAURA. 'Tis Laura, William.

WILLIAM. Folks did tell me that you were named Julia.

LAURA. No—Laura is my name ; but I live with Mistress Julia up at Luther's Farm, and I help her with the work. House-keeping, dairy, poultry, garden. O there's nothing I can't turn my hand to, Master William.

WILLIAM. [*Starts up from the seat in deepest consternation.*] John, John—Come you here, I say ! Come here.

JOHN. [*Emerges from the bushes.*] My dearest master !

WILLIAM. What's this you've been and done, John ?

JOHN. Why, master—the one with the cherry ribbons, to her you did say.

WILLIAM. [*Disgustedly.*] 'Tis the wrong one.

LAURA. What are you two talking about ? William,

do you mean to say as that man of yours was hid in the bushes all the while ?

WILLIAM. Now, John, you've got to get me out of the fix where I'm set.

JOHN. O my dear master, don't you take on so, 'Tis a little bit of misunderstanding to be sure, but one as can be put right very soon.

WILLIAM. Then you get to work and set it right, John, for 'tis beyond the power of me to do so. I'll be blessed if I'll ever get meddling with this sort of job again.

JOHN. Now don't you get so heated, master, but leave it all to me. [*Turning to* LAURA.] My good wench, it seems that there has been a little bit of misunderstanding between you and my gentleman here.

LAURA. [*Angrily.*] So that's what you call it—misunderstanding 'tis a fine long word, but not much of meaning, to it, I'm thinking.

JOHN. Then you do think wrong. Suppose you was to go to market for to buy a nice spring chicken and when you was got half on the way to home you was to see as they had put you up a lean old fowl in place of it, what would you do then ?

LAURA. I don't see that chickens or fowls have anything to do with the matter.

JOHN. Then you're not the smart maid I took you for. 'Tis not you as would be suitable in my master's home. And what's more, 'tis not you as my master's come a-courting of.

LAURA. If 'tis not me, who is it then ?

[WILLIAM *looks at her sheepishly and then turns away.*

JOHN. 'Tis your mistress, since you wants to know.

LAURA. [*Indignantly.*] O, I see it all now——How could I have been so misled !

JOHN. However could poor master have been so mistook, I say.

LAURA. [*Turning away passionately.*] O, I've had enough of you and—and your master.

JOHN. Now that's what I do like for to hear. Because me and master have sommat else to do nor to stand giddle-gaddling in this old wood the rest of the day. Us have got a smartish lot of worry ahead of we, haven't us, master ?

WILLIAM. You never said a truer word, John.

JOHN. Come along then Master William. You can leave the spring vegetables to she. 'Tis more nor she deserves, seeing as her might have known as 'twas her mistress the both of us was after, all the time.

[LAURA *throws herself on the seat and begins to cry silently, but passionately.*

WILLIAM. O John, this courting, 'tis powerful heavy work.

JOHN. [*Taking* WILLIAM'S *arm.*] Come you along with me, master, and I'll give you a helping hand with it all.

LAURA. [*Looking up and speaking violently.*] I warrant you will, you clown. But let me advise you to look better afore you leap next time, or very likely 'tis in sommat worse than a ditchful of nettles as you'll find yourself.

JOHN. [*Looking back over his shoulders as he goes off with* WILLIAM.] I reckon as you've no call to trouble about we, mistress. Us is they what can look after theirselves very well. Suppose you was to wash your face and dry your eyes and set about the boiling of yon spring cabbage. 'Twould be sensibler like nor to bide grizzling after one as is beyond you in his station, so 'twould.

[JOHN *and* WILLIAM *go out, leaving* LAURA *weeping on the bench, the basket of vegetables by her side.*

[*Curtain.*]

ACT II.—Scene 3.

JULIA *is sitting at the foot of a tree in the wood.* CHRIS, NAT *and* TANSIE *are seated near her on the ground.*

JULIA. I wish this day might last for always.

CHRIS. Why, when to-morrow's come, 'twill be the same.

JULIA. That it will not. To-day is a holiday. To-morrow's work.

TANSIE. One day 'tis much the same as t'other with me.

NAT. 'Tis what we gets to eat as do make the change.

TANSIE. I should have thought as how a grand young mistress like yourself might have had the days to your own liking.

JULIA. Ah, and so I did once. But that was before Uncle died and left me the farm. Now, 'tis all different with the days.

CHRIS. How was it with you afore then, mistress?

JULIA. Much the same as 'tis with that bird flying yonder. I did so as I listed. If I had a mind to sleep when the sun was up, then I did sleep. And if my limbs would not rest when 'twas dark, why, then I did roam. There was naught to hold me back from my fancy.

TANSIE. And how is it *now* with you, mistress?

JULIA. 'Tis all said in one word.

CHRIS. What's that?

JULIA. 'Tis "work."

NAT. Work?

CHRIS. Work?

TANSIE. Work! And yet 'tis a fine young lady as you do look in your muslin gown with silky ribbons to it and all.

JULIA. I'm a farmer, Tansie. And for a farmer 'tis work of one sort, or t'other from when the sun is up till the candle has burned itself short. If 'tisn't working with my own hands, 'tis driving of the hands of another.

CHRIS. I've heard tell as a farmer do spin gold all the day same as one of they great spiders as go putting out silk from their mouths.

JULIA. And what is gold to me, Chris, who have no one but myself to spend it on ?

CHRIS. Folks do say as the laying up of gold be one of the finest things in the world.

JULIA. It will never bring happiness to me, Chris.

CHRIS. Come, mistress, 'tis a fine thing to have a great stone roof above the head of you.

JULIA. I'd sooner get my shelter from the green leaves.

NAT. And a grand thing to have your victuals spread afore you each time 'stead of having to go lean very often.

JULIA. O, a handful of berries and a drink of fresh water is enough for me.

TANSIE. And beautiful it must be to stretch the limbs of you upon feathers when night do come down, with a fine white sheet drawn up over your head.

JULIA. O, I could rest more sweetly on the grass and moss yonder.

NAT. I did never sleep within four walls but once, and then 'twas in gaol.

JULIA. O Nat, you were never in gaol, were you ?

NAT. 'Twas that they mistook I for another. And when the morning did come, they did let I go again.

CHRIS. I count 'twas a smartish long night, that !

NAT. 'Twas enough for to shew me how it do feel when anyone has got to bide sleeping with the walls all around of he.

JULIA. And the ceiling above, Nat. And locked door. And other folk lying breathing in the house, hard by. All dark and close.

CHRIS. And where us may lie, the air do run swift over we. We has the smell of the earth and the leaves on us as we do sleep. There baint no darkness for we, for the stars do blink all night through up yonder.

TANSIE. And no sound of other folk breathing but the crying of th' owls and the foxes' bark.

JULIA. Ah, that must be a grand sound, the barking of a fox. I never did hear one. Never.

CHRIS. Ah, 'tis a powerful thin sound, that—but one to raise the hair on a man's head and to clam the flesh of he, at dead of night.

NAT. You come and bide along of we one evening, and you shall hearken to the fox, and badger too, if you've the mind.

JULIA. O that would please me more than anything in the world.

TANSIE. And when 'twas got a little lighter, so that the bushes could be seen, and the fields, I'd shew you where the partridge has her nest beneath the hedge; where we have gotten eggs, and eaten them too.

CHRIS. And I'll take and lead you to a place what I do know of, where the water flows clear as a diamond over the stones. And if you bides there waiting quiet you may take the fish as they come along—and there's a dinner such as the Queen might not get every day of the week.

JULIA. O Chris, who is there to say I must bide in one place when all in me is thirsting to be in t'other!

CHRIS I'm sure I don't know.

NAT. I should move about where I did like, if 'twas me.

TANSIE. A fine young lady like you can do as she pleases.

JULIA. Well then, it pleases me to bide with you in the free air.

CHRIS. Our life, 'tis a poor life, and wandering. 'Tis food one day, and may be going without the next. 'Tis the sun upon the faces of us one hour—and then the rain. But 'tis in freedom that us walks, and we be the masters of our own limbs.

JULIA. Will you be good to me if I journey with you?

CHRIS. Ah, 'tis not likely as I'll ever fail you, mistress.

JULIA. Do not call me mistress any longer, Chris, my name is Julia.

CHRIS. 'Tis a well-sounding name, and one as runs easy as clear water upon the tongue.

JULIA. Tansie, how will it be for me to go with you ?

TANSIE. 'Twill be well enough with the spirit of you I don't doubt, but how'll it be with the fine clothes what you have on ?

NAT. [*Suddenly looking up.*] Why, there's Susan coming.

JULIA. [*Looking in the same direction.*] So that is Susan ?

TANSIE. I count as her has had a smartish job to get away from th'old missis so early in the day.

CHRIS. 'Tis a rare old she cat, and handy with the claw's of her, Susan's missis.

[SUSAN *comes shyly forward.*

NAT. Come you here, Susan, and sit along of we.

JULIA. Yes, sit down with us in this cool shade, Susan. You look warm from running.

SUSAN. O, I didn't know you was here, Mistress Julia.

JULIA. Well, Susan, and so you live at Road Farm. Are you happy there ?

SUSAN. I should be if 'twern't for mistress.

JULIA. No mistress could speak harshly to you, Susan—you are so young and pretty.

SUSAN. Ah, but mistress takes no account of aught but the work you does, and the tongue of her be wonderful lashing.

JULIA. Then how comes it that you have got away to the forest so early on a week day ?

SUSAN. 'Tis that mistress be powerful took up with sommat else this afternoon, and so I was able to run out for a while and her didn't notice me.

TANSIE. Why Su, what's going on up at the farm so particular to-day ?

SUSAN. 'Tis courting.

ALL. Courting ?

SUSAN. Yes. That 'tis. 'Tis our Master William what's dressed up in his Sunday clothes and gone a-courting with a basket of green stuff on his arm big enough to fill the market, very nigh.

CHRIS. Well, well, who'd have thought he had it in him ?

NAT. He's a gentleman what's not cut out for courting, to my mind.

SUSAN. Indeed he isn't, Nat. And however the mistress got him dressed and set off on that business, I don't know.

JULIA. But you have not told us who the lady is, Susan.

SUSAN. [*Suddenly very embarrassed.*] I—I—don't think as I do rightly know who 'tis, mistress.

CHRIS. Why, look you, Susan, you'll have to take and hide yourself if you don't want for them to know as you be got along of we.

SUSAN. What's that, Chris ?

CHRIS. [*Pointing.*] See there, that man of Master Gardner's be a-coming along towards us fast. Look yonder—

SUSAN. O whatever shall I do ? 'Tis John, and surely he will tell of me when he gets back.

NAT. Come you off with me afore he do perceive you, Susan. I'll take you where you shall bide hid from all the Johns in the world if you'll but come along of me.

JULIA. That's it. Take her off, Nat ; take her, Tansie. And do you go along too, Chris, for I have a fancy to bide alone in the stillness of the wood for a while.

[SUSAN, TANSIE *and* NAT *go out.*

CHRIS. Be I to leave you too, Julia.

JULIA. [*Slowly.*] Only for a little moment, Chris ; then you can come for me again. I would like to stay with myself in quiet for a while. New thoughts have come into my mind and I cannot rightly understand what they do say to me, unless I hearken to them alone.

CHRIS. Then I'll leave you, Julia. For things be stirring powerful in my mind too, and I'd give sommat for to come to an understanding with they. Ah, that I would.

[*They look at one another in silence for a moment, then* CHRIS *slowly follows the others, leaving* JULIA *alone.* JULIA *sits alone in the wood. Presently she begins to sing.*

JULIA. [*Singing.*]

I sowed the seeds of love,
It was all in the Spring;
In April, in May, and in June likewise
When small birds they do sing.

[JOHN *with a large basket on his arm comes up to her.*

JOHN. A good day to you, mistress.

JULIA. Good afternoon.

JOHN. Now I count as you would like to know who 'tis that's made so bold in speaking to you, Mistress.

JULIA. Why, you're Master Gardner's farm hand, if I'm not mistaken.

JOHN. Ah, that's right enough. And there be jobs as I wish Master William would get and do for hisself instead of putting them on I.

JULIA. Well, and how far may you be going this afternoon?

JOHN. I baint going no further than where I be a-standing now, mistress.

JULIA. It would appear that your business was with me, then?

JOHN. Ah, you've hit the right nail, mistress. 'Tis with you. 'Tis a straight offer as my master have sent me out for to make.

JULIA. Now I wonder what sort of an offer that might be!

JOHN. 'Tis master's hand in marriage, and a couple of pigs jowls, home-cured, within this here basket.

JULIA. O my good man, you're making game of me.

JOHN. And that I baint, mistress. 'Twas in the church as Master William seed you first. And 'tis very nigh sick unto death with love as he have been since then.

JULIA. Is he too sick to come and plead his cause himself, John ?

JOHN. Ah, and that he be. Do go moulting about the place with his victuals left upon the dish—a sighing and a grizzling so that any maid what's got a heart to th' inside of she would be moved in pity, did she catch ear of it, and would lift he out of the torment.

JULIA. Well, John, I've not seen or heard any of this sad to-do, so I can't be moved in pity.

JOHN. Ah, do you look within this basket at the jowls what Master William have sent you. Maybe as they'll go to your heart straighter nor what any words might.

[JOHN *sits down on the bench by* JULIA *and opens the basket.* JULIA *looks in.*

JULIA. I have no liking for pigs' meat myself.

JOHN. Master's pig meat be different to any in the county, mistress. "Tell her," says Master William, "'tis a rare fine bit of mellow jowl as I be a sending she."

JULIA. O John, I'm a very poor judge of such things.

JOHN. And look you here. I never seed a bit of Master William's home-cured sent out beyond the family to no one till this day. No, that I have not, mistress.

JULIA. [*Shutting the basket.*] Well—I have no use for such a gift, John, so it may be returned again to the family. I am sorry you had the trouble of bringing it so far.

JOHN. You may not be partial to pig meat, mistress, but you'll send back the key of Master William's heart same as you have done the jowls.

JULIA. I have no use for the key of Master William's heart either, John. And you may tell him so, from me.

JOHN. Why, mistress. You don't know what you be a talking of. A man like my master have never had

to take a No in place of Yes in all the born days of him.

JULIA. [*Rising.*] Then he'll have to take it now, John. And I'm thinking 'tis time you set off home again with your load.

JOHN. Well, mistress, I don't particular care to go afore you have given me a good word or sommat as'll hearten up poor Master William in his love sickness.

JULIA. Truly, John, I don't know what you would have me say.

JOHN. I warrant there be no lack of words to the inside of you, if so be as you'd open you mouth a bit wider. 'Tis not silence as a maid is troubled with in general.

JULIA. O, I have plenty of words ready, John, should you care to hear them.

JOHN. Then out with them, Mistress Julia, and tell the master as how you'll take the offer what he have made you.

JULIA. I've never seen your master, John, but I know quite enough about him to say I'll never wed with him. Please to make that very clear when you get back.

JOHN. 'Tis plain as you doesn't know what you be a talking of. And 'tis a wonder as how such foolishness can came from the mouth of a sensible looking maid like yourself.

JULIA. I shall not marry Master William Gardner.

JOHN. I reckon as you'll be glad enough to eat up every one of them words the day you claps eyes on Master William, for a more splendid gentleman nor he never fetched his breath.

JULIA. I'll never wed a farmer, John.

JOHN. And then, look at the gift what Master William's been and sent you. 'Tisn't to everyone as master do part with his pig meat. That 'tisn't.

JULIA. [*Rising.*] Well, you can tell your master I'm not one that can be courted with a jowl, mellow or otherwise. And that I'll not wed until I can give my heart along with my hand.

JOHN. I'd like to know where you would find a better one nor master for to give your heart to, mistress ?

JULIA. May be I have not far to search.

JOHN. [*Taking up the basket.*] You're a rare tricksy maid as ever I did see. Tricksy and tossy too.

JULIA. There—that's enough, John. Suppose you set off home and tell your master he can hang up his meat again in the larder, for all that it concerns me.

JOHN. I'll be blowed if I do say anything of the sort, mistress. I shall get and tell Master William as you be giving a bit of thought to the matter, and that jowls not being to your fancy, 'tis very like as a dish of trotters may prove acceptabler.

JULIA. Say what you like, John. Only let me bide quiet in this good forest now. I want to be with my thoughts.

JOHN. [*Preparing to go and speaking aloud to himself.*] Her's a wonderful contrary bird to be sure. And bain't a shy one neither, what gets timid and flustered and is easily netted. My word, but me and master has a job before us for to catch she.

JULIA. I hear you, and 'tis very rudely that you talk. There's an old saying that I never could see the meaning of before, but now I think 'tis clear, "Like master, like man," they say. I'll have none of Master William, and you can tell him so.

[JOHN *goes out angrily.* JULIA *sits down again on the bench and begins to sing.*

JULIA. [*Singing.*]

My gardener stood by
And told me to take great care,
For in the middle of a red rose-bud
There grows a sharp thorn there.

[LAURA *comes slowly forward, carrying the basket of vegetables on one arm. She holds a handkerchief to her face and is crying.*

JULIA. Why, Laura, what has made you cry so sadly ?

LAURA. O, Julia, 'twas a rare red rose as I held in my hand, and a rare cruel thorn that came from it and did prick me.

JULIA. And a rare basket of green stuff that you have been getting.

LAURA. [*Sinking down on the seat, and weeping violently.*] His dear gift to me!

JULIA. [*Looking into the basket.*] O a wonderful fine gift, to be sure. Young carrots and spring cabbage. I've had a gift offered too—but mine was jowls.

LAURA. Jowls. O, and did you not take them?

JULIA. No, I sent them back to the giver, with the dry heart which was along with them in the same basket.

LAURA. O Julia, how could you be so hard and cruel?

JULIA. Come, wouldn't you have done the same?

LAURA. [*Sobbing vehemently.*] That I should not, Julia.

JULIA. Perhaps you've seen the gentleman then?

LAURA. I have. And O, Julia, he is a beautiful gentleman. I never saw one that was his like.

JULIA. The rare red rose with its thorn, Laura.

LAURA. He did lay the heart of him before me—thinking my name was Julia.

JULIA. And did he lay the vegetables too?

LAURA. 'Twas all the doing of a great fool, that man of his.

JULIA. And you—did you give him what he asked of you—before he knew that your name was not Julia?

LAURA. O, I did—that I did. [*A short silence.*

JULIA. And could you forget the prick of the thorn, did you hold the rose again, Laura?

LAURA. O that I could. For me there'd be naught but the rose, were it laid once more in my hand. But 'tis not likely to be put there, since 'tis you he favours.

JULIA. But I don't favour him.

LAURA. You'll favour him powerful well when you see him, Julia.

JULIA. I've given my heart already, but 'tis not to him.

LAURA. You've given your heart ?

JULIA. Yes, Chris has all of it, Laura. There is nothing left for anyone else in the world.

LAURA. O Julia, think of your position.

JULIA That I will not do. I am going to think of yours.

LAURA. [*Beginning to cry.*] I'm no better in my station than a serving maid, like Susan.

JULIA. [*Pointing.*] There she comes [*calling*] Susan, Susan!

[SUSAN *comes up. During the next sentences* LAURA *takes one bunch of vegetables after another from the basket, smoothing each in turn with a fond caressing movement.*

SUSAN. Did you call, mistress,

JULIA. Yes, Susan. That I did.

SUSAN. Can I help you in any way, Miss Julia ?

JULIA. Yes, and that you can. You have got to run quickly back to the farm.

SUSAN. Be it got terrible late, mistress ?

JULIA. 'Tis not only that. You have got to find your master and tell him to expect a visit from me in less than an hour's time from now. Do you understand ?

SUSAN. O, yes, mistress, and that I do—to tell master as you be coming along after he as fast as you can run.

JULIA. Well—I should not have put it in that way, but 'tis near enough may be. So off, and make haste, Susan.

SUSAN. Please, mistress, I could make the words have a more loving sound to them if you do wish it.

JULIA. My goodness, Susan, what are you thinking of ? Say naught, but that I'm coming. Run away now, and run quickly. [SUSAN *goes off.*

LAURA. [*Looking up, a bunch of carrots in her hands.*] What are you going to do now, Julia ?

JULIA. You shall see, when you have done playing with those carrots.

LAURA. He pulled them, every one, with his own hands, Julia.

JULIA. My love has gathered something better for me than a carrot. See, a spray of elder bloom that was tossing ever so high in the wind.

[*She takes a branch of elder flower from her dress, and shews it to* LAURA.

LAURA. The roots that lie warm in the earth do seem more homely like to me.

JULIA. Well—each one has their own way in love—and mine lies through the dark woods, and yours is in the vegetable garden. And 'tis your road that we will take this afternoon—so come along quickly with me, Laura, for the sun has already begun to change its light.

[LAURA *replaces the vegetables in her basket and rises from the seat as the curtain falls.*

ACT III.—Scene 1.

The Garden of Road Farm as in Act I.

MRS. GARDNER *is knitting in the Arbour.* WILLIAM *strolls about gloomily, his hands in his pockets.*

MRS. GARDNER. And serve you right, William, for sending the man when you should have gone yourself.

WILLIAM. John has a tongue that is better used to this sort of business than mine.

MRS. GARDNER. Nonsense, when was one of our family ever known to fail in the tongue.

WILLIAM. If she that was asked first had only been the right one, all would have been over and done with now.

MRS. GARDNER. 'Tis John that you have got to thank for the blunder.

WILLIAM. [*Sighing.*] That was a rare fine maid, and no mistake.

MRS. GARDNER. And a rare brazen hussy, from all that has reached my ears.

WILLIAM. Well—I've done with courting—now and for all time, that I have. And you may roast me alive if I'll ever go nigh to a maid again.

MRS. GARDNER. That you shall, William—and quickly too. There's no time like the present, and your Sunday clothes are upon you still.

WILLIAM. I was just going up to change, Mother.

MRS. GARDNER. Then you'll please to remain as you are. You may take what gift you like along with you this time, so long as it's none of my home-cured meat.

WILLIAM. I'm blessed if I do stir out again this day. Why, look at the seedlings crying for water, and the nets to lay over the fruit and sommat of everything wanting to be done all around of me. I'll not stir.

[JOHN *comes towards them.*

MRS. GARDNER. Here's John. Suppose he were to make himself useful in the garden for once instead of meddling in things that are none of his business.

JOHN. I'll be blowed if 'tis any more courting as I'll do, neither for Master William nor on my own account.

WILLIAM. Why, John, 'twasn't your fault that the lady wouldn't take me, you did your best with her, I know.

JOHN. An that I did, Master William, but a more contrary coxsy sort of a maid I never did see. "I baint one as fancies pig meat," her did say. And the nose of she did curl away up till it could go no higher. That's not the wench for me, I says to myself.

MRS. GARDNER. Is the jowl hung up in its right place again, John?

JOHN. That 'tis, mistress. I put it back myself, and a good job for that 'taint went out of the family and off to the mouths of strangers, so says I.

MRS. GARDNER. Do you tend to Master William's

garden John, instead of talking. We've had enough of your tongue for one day.

JOHN. Why, be Master William goin' out for to court again, this afternoon ?

WILLIAM. No, John—No, I've had enough of that for my life time.

JOHN. So have I, master, and more nor enough. I don't care particular if I never set eyes on a maid again.

WILLIAM. [*Pointing to a plot of ground.*] That's where I pulled the young carrots this morning.

JOHN. Ah, and so you did, master.

WILLIAM. And there's from where I took the Early Snowballs.

JOHN. And a great pity as you did. There be none too many of that sort here.

WILLIAM. She had a wonderful soft look in her eyes as she did handle them and the spring cabbage, John.

JOHN. Ah, and a wonderful hard tongue when her knowed 'twasn't for she as they was pulled.

WILLIAM. Was t'other maid anything of the same pattern, John ?

JOHN. Upon my word, if t'other wasn't the worst of the two, for she did put a powerful lot of venom into the looks as she did give I, and the words did fall from she like so many bricks on my head.

WILLIAM. Pity the first was not the right maid.

JOHN. Ah, a maid what can treat a prime home-cured jowl as yon did baint the sort for to mistress it over we, I'm thinking.

MRS. GARDNER. See here, John—suppose you were to let your tongue bide still in its home awhile, and start doing something with your hands.

JOHN. That's right enough, mistress. What's wanted, Master William ?

WILLIAM. I'm blessed if I can recollect, John. This courting business lies heavy on me, and I don't seem able to get above it, like.

JOHN. I'd let it alone, master, if I was you. They be

all alike, the maids. And 'twouldn't be amiss if we was to serve they as we serves the snails when they gets to the young plants.

[SUSAN *comes hurriedly into the garden.*

SUSAN. Please master, please mistress.

MRS. GARDNER. What do you mean, Susan, by coming into the garden without your cap? Go and put it on at once.

SUSAN. The wind must have lifted it from me, mistress, for I was running ever so fast.

MRS. GARDNER. Do you expect me to believe that, Susan—and not a breath stirring the flowers or trees, or anything?

SUSAN. 'Twas the lady I met as—as—as I was coming across the field from feeding the fowls.

MRS. GARDNER. What lady, Susan?

SUSAN. Her from Luther's, mistress.

JOHN. And what of she; out with it, wench.

SUSAN. She did tell I to say as she be coming along as fast as she may after Master William.

WILLIAM. [*As though to himself with an accent of despair.*] No. No.

JOHN. There, master, didn't I tell you so?

WILLIAM. [*Very nervously.*] What did you tell me, John?

JOHN. That, let her abide and her'd find the senses of she presently.

WILLIAM. O I'm blessed if I do know what to do.

[JOHN *takes his master's arm and draws him aside.*

JOHN. You pluck up your heart, my dearest master, and court she hard. And in less nor a six months 'tis along to church as you'll be a-driving she.

WILLIAM. But John, 'tis t'other with the cherry ribbons that has taken all my fancy.

JOHN. No, no, Master William. You take and court the mistress. You take and tame the young vixen, and get the gold and silver from she. T'other wench is but the serving maid.

SUSAN. The lady's coming along ever so quickly, master.

[MRS. GARDNER, *rising and folding up her knitting.*

MRS. GARDNER. You'll please to come indoors with me, William, and I'll brush you down and make you look more presentable than you appear just now. Susan, you'll get a cap to you head at once, do you hear me! And John, take and water master's seedlings. Any one can stand with their mouths open and their eyes as big as gooseberries if they've a mind. 'Tis not particular sharp to do so. Come, William.

WILLIAM. I'd like a word or two with John first, Mother.

MRS. GARDNER. You come along with me this moment, William. 'Tis a too many words by far that you've had with John already, and much good they've done to you. Come you in with me.

WILLIAM. O I'm blessed if I do know whether 'tis on my head or on my feet that I'm standing.

[WILLIAM *follows his mother slowly and gloomily into the house.*

JOHN. Well—if ever there was a poor, tormented animal 'tis the master.

SUSAN. Ah, mistress should have been born a drover by rights. 'Tis a grand nagging one as her'd have made, and sommat what no beast would ever have got the better of.

JOHN. I wouldn't stand in Master William's shoes, not if you was to put me knee deep in gold.

SUSAN. Nor I.

JOHN. Ah, this courting business, 'tis a rare caddling muddle when 'tis all done and said.

SUSAN. 'Tis according as some folks do find it, Master John.

JOHN. 'Tis a smartish lot as you'll get of it come Sunday night, my wench. You wait and see.

SUSAN. That shews how little you do know. 'Twill be better nor ever with me then.

JOHN. 'Twill be alone by yourself as you'll go walking, Su.

SUSAN. We'll see about that when the time comes, John.

JOHN. All I says is that I baint a-going walking with you.

SUSAN. I never walk with two, John.

JOHN. You'll have to learn to go in your own company.

SUSAN. I shall go by the side of my husband by then, very likely.

JOHN. Your husband ? What tales be you a-giving out now ?

SUSAN. 'Tis to Nat as I'm to be wed come Saturday.

JOHN. Get along with you, Susan, and put a cap to your head. Mistress will be coming out presently, and then you know how 'twill be if her catches you so. Get along in with you.

SUSAN. Now you don't believe what I'm telling you —but it's true, O it's true.

JOHN. Look here—There's company at the gate, and you a-standing there like any rough gipsy wench on the road. Get you in and make yourself a decenter appearance and then go and tell the mistress as they be comed.

SUSAN. [*Preparing to go indoors and speaking over her shoulder.*] 'Tis in the parson's gown as you should be clothed, Master John. Ah, 'tis a wonderful wordy preacher as you would make, to be sure. And 'tis a rare crop as one might raise with the seed as do fall from your mouth.

[*She goes indoors.* JULIA *comes leisurely into the garden.*

JULIA. Well, John, and how are you feeling now ?

JOHN. Nicely, thank you, mistress. See yon arbour ?

JULIA. And that I do, John.

JOHN. Well, you may go and sit within it till the master has leisure to come and speak with you.

JULIA. Thank you, John, but I would sooner stop and watch you tend the flowers.

JOHN. 'Tis all one to me whether you does or you does not.

JULIA. Now, John, you are angry with me still.

JOHN. I likes a wench as do know the mind of she, and not one as can blow hot one moment and cold the next.

JULIA. There was never a moment when I did not know my own mind, John. And that's the truth.

JOHN. Well, us won't say no more about that. 'Taint fit as there should be ill feeling nor quarrelling 'twixt me and you.

JULIA. You're right, John. And there was something that I had it in my mind to ask you.

JOHN. You can say your fill. There baint no one but me in the garden.

JULIA. John, you told me that since Sunday your master has been sick with love.

JOHN. That's right enough, mistress. I count as we shall bury he if sommat don't come to his relief.

JULIA. Now, John, do you look into my eyes and tell me if 'tis for love of Julia or of Laura that your master lies sickening.

JOHN. You'd best go and ask it of his self, mistress. 'Tis a smartish lot of work as I've got to attend to here.

JULIA. You can go on working, John. I am not hindering you.

JOHN. No more than one of they old Juney bettels a-roaring and a-buzzin round a man's head.

JULIA. Now, John—you must tell me which of the two it is. Is it Laura whom your master loves, or Julia ?

JOHN. 'Tis Julia, then, since you will have it out of me.

JULIA. No, John, you're not looking straight at me. You are looking down at the flower bed. Let your eyes meet mine.

JOHN. [*Looking up crossly.*] I've got my work to think of. I'm not one to stand cackling with a maid.

JULIA. Could you swear me it is Julia ?

JOHN. 'Tis naught to I which of you it be. There bide over, so as I can get the watering finished.

JULIA. [*Seizes the watering can.*] Now, John, you have got to speak the truth to me.

JOHN. Give up yon can, I tell you. O you do act wonderful unseemly for a young lady.

JULIA. [*Withholding the can.*] Not till I have the truth from you.

JOHN. [*Angrily.*] Well then, is it likely that my master would set his fancy on such a plaguy, wayward maid? Why, Master William do know better nor to do such a thing, I can tell you.

JULIA. Then 'tis for Laura that he is love-sick, John.

JOHN. Give I the watering can.

JULIA. [*Giving him the can.*] Here it is, dear John. O I had a fancy all the time that 'twas to Laura your master had lost his heart. And now I see I made no mistake.

JOHN. I shouldn't have spoke as I did if you hadn't a buzzed around I till I was drove very nigh crazy. Master William, he'll never forgive me this.

JULIA. That he will, I'm sure, when he has listened to what I have got to say to him.

JOHN. You do set a powerful store on what your tongue might say, but I'd take and bide quiet at home if I was you and not come hunting of a nice reasonable gentleman like master, out of his very garden.

JULIA. O John, you're a sad, ill-natured man, and you misjudge me very unkindly. But I'll not bear malice if you will just run in and tell your master that I want a word with him.

JOHN. A word? Why not say fifty? When was a maid ever satisfied with one word I'd like to know?

JULIA. Well—I shan't say more than six, very likely, so fetch him to me now, John, and I'll wait here in the garden. [JOHN *looks at her with exasperated contempt. Then he slowly walks away towards the house.* JULIA *goes in the opposite direction to the garden gate.*

JULIA. [*Calling.*] Chris! [CHRIS *comes in*

JULIA. [*Pointing.*] O Chris, look at this fine garden —and yon arbour—see the fine house, with lace curtains to the windows of it.

CHRIS. [*Sullenly.*] Ah—I sees it all very well.

JULIA. And all this could be mine for the stretching out of a hand.

CHRIS. Then stretch it.

JULIA. 'Twould be like putting a wild bird into a gilded cage, to set me here in this place. No, I must go free with you, Chris—and we will wander where our spirits lead us—over all the world if we have a mind to do so.

CHRIS. Please God you'll not grieve at your choice.

JULIA. That I never shall. Now call to Laura. Is she in the lane outside?

CHRIS. There, she be come to the gate now.

[LAURA *comes in, followed by* NAT *and* TANSIE.

JULIA. [*Pointing to a place on the ground.*] Laura, see, here is the place from which your young carrots were pulled.

LAURA. O look at the flowers, Julia—Lillies, pinks and red roses.

JULIA. 'Tis a fine red rose that shall be gathered for you presently, Laura. [JOHN *comes up.*

JOHN. The master's very nigh ready now, mistress.

[SUSAN *follows him.*

SUSAN. The mistress says, please to be seated till she do come.

JOHN. [*To* CHRIS *and* NAT.] Now, my men, we don't want the likes of you in here. You had best get off afore Master William catches sight of you.

JULIA. No, John. These are my friends, and I wish them to hear all that I have to say to your master.

JOHN. Ah, 'tis in the grave as poor Master William will be landed soon if you don't have a care.

LAURA. [*Anxiously.*] O is he so delicate as that, John?

JOHN. Ah—and that he be. And these here love

matters and courtings and foolishness have very nigh done for he. I don't give him but a week longer if things do go on as they be now.

[WILLIAM *and* MRS. GARDNER *come in.* WILLIAM *looks nervously round him.* MRS. GARDNER *perceives the gipsies, and* SUSAN *talking to* NAT.

MRS. GARDNER. Susan, get you to your place in the kitchen, as quick as you can. John, put yon roadsters through the gate, if you please. [*Turning to* JULIA.] Now young Miss ?

JULIA. A very good evening to you, mistress. And let me make Chris known to you for he and I are to be wed to-morrow.

[*She takes* CHRIS *by the hand and leads him forward.*

MRS. GARDNER. What's this ? William, do you understand what the young person is telling us ?

JULIA. [*Taking* LAURA *with her other hand.*] And here is Laura to whom I have given all my land and all my money. She is the mistress of Luther's now.

JOHN. [*Aside to* WILLIAM.] Now master, hearken to that. Can't you lift your spirits a bit.

JULIA. [*To* MRS. GARDNER.] And I beg you to accept her as a daughter. She will make a better farmer's wife than ever I shall.

JOHN. [*In a loud whisper.*] Start courting, master.

WILLIAM. O I dare not quite so sudden, John.

MRS. GARDNER. [*Sitting down.*] It will take a few moments for me to understand this situation.

JULIA. There is no need for any hurry. We have all the evening before us.

JOHN. [*Hastily gathers a rosebud and puts it into* WILLIAM'S *hand.*] Give her a blossom, master. 'Tis an easy start off.

WILLIAM. [*Coming forward shyly with the flower.*] Would you fancy a rosebud, mistress ?

LAURA. O that I would, master.

WILLIAM. Should you care to see—to see where the young celery is planted out ?

LAURA. O, I'd dearly love to see the spot.

WILLIAM. I'll take you along to it then. [*He gives her his arm, very awkwardly, and they move away.*

MRS. GARDNER. [*Sitting down.*] Well—things have changed since I was young.

JOHN. [*Looking viciously at* NAT *and* SUSAN.] Ah, I counts they have, mistress, and 'tis all for the worse.

SUSAN. [*Comes forward timidly.*] And me and Nat are to be married too, mistress.

MRS. GARDNER. I should have given you notice anyhow to-night, Susan, so perhaps it's just as well you have made sure of some sort of a roof to your head.

NAT. 'Twill be but the roof of th' old cart, mistress; but I warrant as her'll sleep bravely under it, won't you, Su.

SUSAN. That I shall, dear Nat.

TANSIE. Well, Master John, have you a fancy to come tenting along of we.

JOHN. Upon my word, but I don't know how 'tis with the young people nowadays, they be so bold.

JULIA. [*Who has been standing apart, her hand in that of* CHRIS.] New days, new ways, John.

JOHN. Bless my soul, but 'tis hard to keep up with all these goings on, and no mistake.

JULIA. No need for you to try, John. If you are too old to run with us you must abide still and watch us as we go.

CHRIS. But there, you needn't look downhearted, master, for I knows someone as'll give you a rare warm welcome if so be as you should change your mind and take your chance in the open, same as we.

TANSIE. You shall pay for that, Chris.

JOHN. [*Stiffly.*] I hope as I've a properer sense of my duty nor many others what I could name.

MRS. GARDNER. Those are the first suitable words that have been spoken in my hearing this afternoon.

[WILLIAM, *with* LAURA *on his arm, returns.* LAURA *carries a small cucumber very lovingly.*

LAURA. Julia, look! The first one of the season! O, isn't it a picture!

JULIA. O Laura, 'tis a fine wedding gift to be sure.

WILLIAM. [*Stepping up to* JOHN.] John, my man, here's a five pound note to your pocket. I'd never have won this lady here if it hadn't been for you.

JOHN. [*Taking the note.*] Don't name it, dear master. 'Tis a long courtship what has no ending to it, so I always says.

MRS. GARDNER. 'Tis one upset after another, but suppose you were to make yourself useful for once, Susan, and bring out the tray with the cake and glasses on it.

JOHN. Ah, that's it, and I'll go along of she and help draw the cider. Courtship be powerful drying work.

LAURA. [*Looking into* WILLIAM'S *eyes.*] O William, 'twas those Early Snowballs that did first stir up my heart.

WILLIAM. 'Twas John who thought of them. Why, John has more sensible thoughts to the mind of him than any other man in the world—and when the cider is brought, 'tis to John's health we will all drink.

[*Curtain.*]

PRINCESS ROYAL

CHARACTERS IN THE PLAY

ROSE, MARION, } *village girls.*

LADY MILLICENT.

ALICE, *her maid.*

LEAH, *an old gipsy.*

SUSAN, *otherwise Princess Royal, her grand-daughter.*

JOCKIE, *a little swine herd.*

LADY CULLEN.

Her ladies in waiting (or one lady only).

LORD CULLEN, *her only son.*

As many girls as are needed for the dances should be in this Play.

The parts of Lord Cullen and Jockie may be played by girls.

PRINCESS ROYAL.

ACT I.—Scene 1.

A village green. Some girls with market baskets come on to it, each one carrying a leaflet which she is earnestly reading.

Gradually all the girls approach from different sides reading leaflets.

Under a tree at the far end of the green the old gipsy is sitting—she lights a pipe and begins to smoke as ROSE, *her basket full of market produce, comes slowly forward reading her sheet of paper. She is followed by* MARION—*also reading.*

ROSE. Well, 'tis like to be a fine set out, this May Day.

MARION. I can make naught of it myself.

ROSE. Why, 'tis Lord Cullen putting it about as how he be back from the war and thinking of getting himself wed, like.

MARION. I understands that much, I do.

ROSE. Only he can't find the maid what he's lost his heart to.

MARION. [*Reading.*] The wench what his lordship did see a-dancing all by herself in the forest when he was hid one day all among the brambles, a-rabbiting or sommat.

ROSE. And when my lord would have spoke with her, the maid did turn and fled away quick as a weasel.

MARION. And his lordship off to the fighting when 'twas next morn.

ROSE. So now, each maid of us in the village and all around be to dance upon the green come May Day so that my lord may see who 'twas that pleased his fancy.

[SUSAN *comes up and stands quietly listening. She is bare foot and her skirt is ragged, she wears a shawl over her shoulders and her hair is rough and untidy. On her arm she carries a basket containing a few vegetables and other marketings.*

MARION. And when he do pitch upon the one, 'tis her as he will wed.

ROSE. 'Twill be a thing to sharpen the claws of th'old countess worse nor ever—that marriage.

MARION. Ah, I reckon as her be mortal angered with all the giddle-gaddle this business have set up among the folk.

ROSE. [*Regretfully.*] I've never danced among the trees myself.

MARION. [*Sadly.*] Nor I, neither, Rose.

ROSE. I'd dearly like to be a countess, Marion.

MARION. His lordship might think I was the maid. I'm spry upon my feet you know.

[SUSAN *comes still nearer.*

MARION. [*Turning to her and speaking rudely.*] Well, Princess Rags, 'tisn't likely as 'twas you a-dancing one of your Morris dances in the wood that day!

ROSE. [*Mockingly.*] 'Tisn't likely as his lordship would set his thoughts on a wench what could caper about like a Morris man upon the high road. So there.

SUSAN. [*Indifferently.*] I never danced upon the high road, I dances only where 'tis dark with gloom and no eyes upon me. No mortal eyes.

MARION. [*Impudently.*] Get along with you, Princess Royal. Go off to th' old gipsy Gran'ma yonder. We don't want the likes of you along of us.

ROSE. Go off and dance to your own animals, Miss

Goatherd. All of us be a-going to practise our steps against May Day. Come along girls.

[*She signs to the other girls who all draw near and arrange themselves for a Country Dance.* SUSAN *goes slowly towards her* GRANDMOTHER *and sits on the ground by her side, looking sadly and wistfully at the dancers. At the end of the dance, the girls pick up their baskets and go off in different directions across the green.* SUSAN *and her* GRANDMOTHER *remain in their places. The gipsy continues to smoke and* SUSAN *absently turns over the things in her basket.*

SUSAN. They mock me in the name they have fixed to me—Princess Royal.

GRANDMOTHER. Let them mock. I'll bring the words back to them like scorpions upon their tongues.

[*There is a little silence and then* SUSAN *begins to sing as though to herself.*

SUSAN. [*Singing.*]

"As I walked out one May morning,
So early in the Spring;
I placed my back against the old garden gate,
And I heard my true love sing."[1]

GRANDMOTHER. [*At the end of the singing.*] It might be the blackcap a-warbling all among of the branches. So it might.

SUSAN. Ah, 'twas I that was a-dancing in the shade of the woods that day.

GRANDMOTHER. He'll never look on the likes of you —that's sure enough, my little wench.

SUSAN. I wish he was a goat-herd like myself—O that I do.

GRANDMOTHER. Then there wouldn't be no use in your wedding yourself with him as I can see.

[1] "*As I walked Out.*" *From Folk Songs from Essex collected by R. Vaughan Williams. The whole, or two verses can be sung.*

SUSAN. 'Tis himself, not his riches that I want.

GRANDMOTHER. You be speaking foolishness. What do you know of him—what do us blind worms know about the stars above we ?

SUSAN. I see'd him pass by upon his horse one day. All there was of him did shine like the sun upon the water—I was very near dazed by the brightness. So I was.

[*The* GRANDMOTHER *continues to smoke in silence.*

SUSAN. [*Softly.*] And 'twas then I lost the heart within me to him.

[JOCKIE *runs up beating his tabor.*

SUSAN. [*Springing up.*] Come, Jockie, I have a mind to dance a step or two. [*Rubbing her eyes with the back of her hands.*] Tears be for them as have idle times and not for poor wenches what mind cattle and goats. Come, play me my own music, Jock. And play it as I do like it best.

[JOCKIE *begins to play the tune of "Princess Royal" and* SUSAN *dances. Whilst* SUSAN *is dancing* LADY MILLICENT *and her waiting maid come slowly by and stand watching.* SUSAN *suddenly perceives them and throws herself on the ground.* JOCKIE *stops playing.*

LADY MILLICENT. [*Fanning herself.*] A wondrous bold dance, upon my word—could it have been that which captivated my lord, Alice ?

ALICE. O no, mistress. His lordship has no fancy for boldness in a maid.

LADY MILLICENT. Immodest too. A Morris dance. The girl should hide her face in shame.

ALICE. And there she is, looking at your ladyship with her gipsy eyes, bold as a brass farthing.

SUSAN. [*Starting up and speaking passionately.*] I'll not be taunted for my dancing—I likes to dance wild, and leap with my body when my spirit leaps, and fly with my limbs when my heart flies and move in the air same as the birds do move when 'tis mating time.

GRANDMOTHER. Ah, 'tis so with she. She baint no tame mouse what creeps from its hole along of t'others and who do go shuffle shuffle, in and out of the ring mild as milk and naught in the innards of they but the squeak.

SUSAN. (*Defiantly.*] 'Twas my dance gained his lordship's praise—so there, fine madam.

LADY MILLICENT. Your dance? Who are you then?

ALICE. A gipsy wench, mistress, who minds the goats and pigs for one of they great farms.

GRANDMOTHER. Have a care for that tongue of yours, madam waiting maid. For I know how to lay sommat upon it what you won't fancy.

LADY MILLICENT. [*Coming up to* SUSAN *and laying her hand on her arm.*] Now tell me your name, my girl.

SUSAN. They call me Princess Royal.

LADY MILLICENT. O that must be in jest. Why, you are clothed in rags, poor thing.

SUSAN. [*Shaking herself free.*] I'd sooner wear my own rags nor the laces which you have got upon you.

LADY MILLICENT. Now why do you say such a thing?

SUSAN. 'Twas in these rags as I danced in the wood that day, and 'tis by these rags as my lord will know me once more.

LADY MILLICENT. Listen, I will cover you in silk and laces, Princess Royal.

ALICE. Susan is the maid's name.

SUSAN. I don't want none of your laces or silks.

LADY MILLICENT. And feed you with poultry and cream and sweetmeats.

SUSAN. I want naught but my crust of bread.

LADY MILLICENT. I'll fill your hands with gold pieces.

GRANDMOTHER. Do you hear that, Sue?

SUSAN. [*Doggedly.*] I hear her well enough, Gran.

LADY MILLICENT. If you'll teach me your dance against May Day. Then, I'll clothe myself much

after your fashion and dance upon the green with the rest.

SUSAN. I'll not learn you my dance. Not for all the gold in the world. You shan't go and take the only thing I have away from me.

LADY MILLICENT. [*Angrily.*] Neither shall a little gipsy wretch like you take my love from me. We were as good as promised to each other at our christening.

ALICE. Don't put yourself out for the baggage, madam. His lordship would never look on her.

GRANDMOTHER. Gold, did you say, mistress ?

LADY MILLICENT. Gold ? O yes—an apron full of gold, and silver too.

GRANDMOTHER. Do you hear that, Susan ?

SUSAN. [*Doggedly.*] I'll not do it for a King's ransom.

GRANDMOTHER. You will. You'll do it for the sake of poor old Gran, what's been father and mother to you——and what's gone hungered and thirsty so that you might have bread and drink.

SUSAN. [*Distractedly.*] O I can never give him up.

GRANDMOTHER. He'll never be yourn to give—Dance till your legs is off and he'll have naught to say to a gipsy brat when 'tis all finished.

ALICE. Whilst my lady belongs to his lordship's own class, 'tis but suitable as she should be the one to wed with him—knowing the foreign tongues and all, and playing so sweetly on her instruments. There's a lady anyone would be proud to take before the Court in London.

[SUSAN *turns away with a movement of despair. The* GRANDMOTHER *begins to smoke again.* LADY MILLICENT *fans herself and* ALICE *arranges her own shawl.*

GRANDMOTHER. I could do with a little pig up at our place if I'd the silver to take into the market for to buy him with. [*A silence.*

GRANDMOTHER. And I could do with a pair of good shoes to my poor old feet come winter time when 'tis snowing. [*Another silence.*

GRANDMOTHER. And 'twould be good not to go to bed with the pain of hunger within my lean old body—so 'twould. [SUSAN *turns round suddenly.*

SUSAN. I'll do it, Gran. I'll do it for your sake. 'Tis very likely true what you do say, all of you. I'd but dance my feet off for naught. When he came to look into my gipsy eyes, 'twould all be over and done with.

LADY MILLICENT. Sensible girl.

ALICE. 'Tis time she should see which way her bread was spread.

SUSAN. Come, Jockie, come ladies—come Gran—we'll be off to the quiet of our own place where I can learn her ladyship the steps and capers.

GRANDMOTHER. [*Rising and pointing to an advancing figure.*] You'd best make haste. The mice be a-running from their holes once more—t'wouldn't do for they to know aught about this.

SUSAN. Let us go quickly then.

[*The* GRANDMOTHER, SUSAN, LADY MILLICENT *with* ALICE *and* JOCKIE *go out as a crowd of village girls come on to the green, and laughing and talking together, arrange themselves to practise a Country Dance.*

End of Act I.

ACT II.—Scene 1.

Groups of village girls are sitting or standing about on the green. A dais has been put up at one end of it.

MARION. How slow the time do pass, this May Day.

ROSE. Let's while it away with a song or two.

[*They all join in singing. At the end of the song the gipsy comes slowly and painfully across the green, casting black looks to right and to left. She is followed by* SUSAN, *who appears weighed down by sadness.*

ROSE. Good afternoon, Princess Royal Rags. Are we to see you cutting capers before his lordship this afternoon ?

MARION. Get along and hide your bare feet behind the tree, Royal. I'd be ashamed to go without shoes if 'twas me.

SUSAN. O leave me alone—you be worse nor a nest of waspes—that you be.

GRANDMOTHER. [*Turning fiercely round.*] Us'll smoke them out of their holes one day—see if us do not.

[*They pass over to the tree where the* GRANDMOTHER *sits down and* SUSAN *crouches by her side. Presently they are joined by* JOCKIE. *The girls sing a verse or two of another song, and during this* LADY MILLICENT, *enveloped in a big cloak, goes over to the tree, followed by* ALICE, *also wearing a long cloak and they sit down by the side of* SUSAN.

MARION. [*Pointing.*] Who are those yonder, Rose ?

ROSE. I'm sure I don't know, Marion—strangers, may be.

MARION. O my heart goes wild this afternoon.

ROSE. Mine too. Look, there they come.

[*The Music begins to play and old* LADY CULLEN, *followed by her lady companions, comes slowly towards the dais, on which she seats herself.*

LADY CULLEN. Dear me, what a gathering to be sure.

HER LADY. Indeed it is an unusual sight.

LADY CULLEN. And O what a sad infatuation on the part of my poor boy.

HER LADY. The war has been known to turn many a brain.

LADY CULLEN. And yet my son holds his own with the brightest intelligences of the day.

HER LADY. Only one little spot of his lordship's brain seems to be affected.

LADY CULLEN. Just so. But here he comes, poor misguided youth.

[LORD CULLEN *comes slowly over the green, looking to right and to left. He mounts the dais and sits down by his mother, and the music plays for a country dance.* "*The Twenty Ninth of May.*" *The girls arrange themselves, and during the dance* LORD CULLEN *scans each face very eagerly. The dance ends and the girls pass in single file before the dais.*

LORD CULLEN. No, no—that was not the music of it, that was not the dance—not a face among them resembles the image I carry in my heart.

LADY CULLEN. [*Aside.*] Thank goodness. May that face never be seen again.

[*A fresh group come up and another dance is formed and danced.*

LORD CULLEN. [*At the end of it.*] Worse and worse. Could I have dreamed both the music and the dance and the dancer ?

LADY CULLEN. [*Soothingly.*] I am sure this was the case, my dear son.

LORD CULLEN. [*Rallying.*] I heard her voice singing in the forest before ever she began to dance. It was the sweetest voice and song I ever heard. [*Looking around.*] Can any of these maid, sing to me, I wonder ?

MARION. [*Steps forward.*] I only know one song, my lord.

[LORD CULLEN *signs to her to sing, and she stands before the dais and sings a verse of* "*Bedlam.*'

LORD CULLEN. [*Impatiently.*] No, no—that is not in the least what I remember. [*Turning to* ROSE.] You try now.

ROSE I don't sing, my lord—but—[*Indicating another girl in the group*] she has a sweet voice, and she knows a powerful lot of songs.

[*A girl steps out from the others and sings a verse of* "*The Lark in the Morn.*"

LORD CULLEN. Not that. Mine was a song to stir the depths of a man's heart and bring tears up from the fountains of it.

[*He leans back in deep dejection—and at this moment* LADY MILLICENT *and* ALICE *come forward.*

LORD CULLEN. [*Eagerly.*] I seem to know that russet skirt—those bare, small feet. [*Standing up quickly.*] Mother, look at that maid with the red kerchief on her head.

LADY CULLEN. Some sort of a gipsy dress, to all appearance.

LORD CULLEN. [*Doubtfully.*] The skirt she wore was torn and ragged—that day in the forest. She had no gold rings to her ears, nor silken scarf upon her head—But this might be her dress for holidays.

[JOCKIE *advances and begins to play the tune of "Princess Royal."*

LORD CULLEN. [*Eagerly.*] That is the right music —O is it possible my quest is ended!

[LADY MILLICENT *and* ALICE, *standing opposite one to another begin to dance—slowly and clumsily, and in evident doubt as to their steps.* LORD CULLEN *watches them for a moment and then claps his hands angrily as a sign for the music to stop. The dancers pause.*

LORD CULLEN. This is a sad mimicry of my beautiful love. But there lies something behind the masquerade which I shall probe.

[*He leaves the dais and goes straight towards* LADY MILLICENT, *who turns from him in confusion.*

LORD CULLEN. From whom did you take the manner and the colour of your garments, my maid?

[LADY MILLICENT *remains obstinately silent.*

LORD CULLEN. [*To* ALICE.] Perhaps you have a

tongue in your head. From whom did you try to learn those steps ?

[ALICE *turns sulkily away.* JOCKIE *comes forward.*

JOCKIE. I'll tell your lordship all about it, and I'll take your lordship straight to the right wench, that I will, if so be as your lordship will give a shilling to a poor little swine-herd what goes empty and hungered most of the year round.

LORD CULLEN. A handful of gold, my boy, if you lead me rightly.

[JOCKIE *leads the way to the tree where* SUSAN *is sitting. She stands up as* LORD CULLEN *approaches, and for a moment they gaze at one another in silence.*

GRANDMOTHER. You might curtsey to the gentleman, Susan.

LORD CULLEN. No—there's no need of that, from her to me. [*Turning to* JOCKIE *and putting his hand in his pocket.*] Here, my boy, is a golden pound for you—and more shall follow later.

[*He then takes* SUSAN'S *hand and leads her to the foot of the dais.*

LORD CULLEN. Will you dance for me again, Susan ?

SEVERAL OF THE GIRLS. [*Mockingly.*] Princess Royal is her name.

MARION. [*Rudely.*] Or Princess Rags.

SUSAN. 'Tis all took out of my hands now, I can but do as your lordship says. Jockie, play me my music, and play it bravely too.

[JOCKIE *places himself near her and begins to play.* SUSAN *dances by herself. At the end of her dance* LORD CULLEN *leads the applause, and even the ladies on the dais join faintly in it. He then takes* SUSAN *by the hand and mounts the dais with her and presents her to his mother.*

LADY CULLEN. [*Aside, to her companion.*] I wonder if the young person understands that my poor boy is a little touched in the brain ?

LORD CULLEN. Here is your daughter, mother.

[LADY CULLEN *and* SUSAN *look at one another in silence. After a moment* SUSAN *turns to* LORD CULLEN.

SUSAN. I'm a poor ragged thing to be daughter to the likes of she. But the heart within of me is grander nor that of any queen, because of the love that it holds for you, my lord.

[LORD CULLEN *takes her hand and leads her to the front of the dais.*

LORD CULLEN. We will be married to-morrow, my princess. And all these good people shall dance at our wedding.

MARION. [*Springing up.*] And we'll do a bit of dancing now as well. Come, Jockie, give us the tune of " Haste to the Wedding."

ROSE. That's it. Come girls—

LADY MILLICENT. [*To* ALICE.] I pray he won't find out about me.

[*The old* GRANDMOTHER *has come slowly towards the middle of the green.*

GRANDMOTHER. Ah, and my little wench will know how to pay back some of the vipers tongues which slandered her, when she sits on her velvet chair as a countess, the diamonds a-trickling from her neck and the rubies a-crowning of her head. Her'll not forget the snakes what did lie in the grass. Her'll have her heel upon they, so that their heads be put low and there shan't go no more venom from their great jaws to harm she, my pretty lamb—my little turtle.

[*The music begins to play and all those on the green form themselves for the dance.* LORD CULLEN *and* SUSAN *stands side by side in front of the dais, and the* GRANDMOTHER

lights a pipe and smokes it as she watches the dance from below. At the end of the dance LORD CULLEN, *leading* SUSAN, *comes down from the dais and, followed by* LADY CULLEN *and her ladies, passes between two lines of girls and so off the stage. The girls follow in procession, and lastly the* GRANDMOTHER *preceded by* JOCKIE, *beating his drum.*

[*Curtain.*]

THE SEEDS OF LOVE

CHARACTERS.

JOHN DANIEL, *aged* 30, *a Miller.*

ROSE-ANNA
KITTY, *aged* 16 } *his sisters.*

ROBERT PEARCE, *aged* 26.

LIZ
JANE } *elderly cousins of Robert.*

JEREMY, *John's servant—of middle age.*

MARY MEADOWS, *aged* 24, *a Herbalist.*

LUBIN.

ISABEL.

The time is Midsummer.

THE SEEDS OF LOVE.

ACT I.

A woodland road outside MARY'S *cottage. There are rough seats in the porch and in front of the window. Bunches of leaves and herbs hang drying around door and window.* MARY *is heard singing within.*

MARY. [*Singing.*]

I sowed the seeds of Love,
And I sowed them in the Spring.
I gathered them up in the morning so soon.
While the sweet birds so sweetly sing,
While the sweet birds so sweetly sing.[1]

[MARY *comes out of the cottage, a bundle of enchanters nightshade in her arms. She hangs it by a string to the wall and then goes indoors.*

MARY. [*Singing.*]

The violet I did not like,
Because it bloomed so soon;
The lily and the pink I really over think,
So I vowed I would wait till June,
So I vowed I would wait till June.

[*During the singing* LUBIN *comes slowly and heavily along the road. He wears the dress of a farm labourer and carries a scythe over his shoulder. In front of the cottage he pauses, looks round doubtfully, and then sits stiffly and wearily down on the bench beneath the window.*

[1] "The Seeds of Love," "Folk Songs from Somerset," edited by Cecil J. Sharp and Charles L. Marsden.

MARY. [*Coming to the doorway with more plants and singing.*]

"For the grass that has oftentimes been trampled underfoot,
Give it time, it will rise up again."

LUBIN. [*Looking up gloomily.*] And that it won't, mistress.

MARY. [*Suddenly perceiving him and coming out.*] O you are fair spent from journeying. Can I do anything for you, master?

LUBIN. [*Gazing at her fixedly.*] You speak kindly for a stranger, but 'tis beyond the power of you nor anyone to do aught for me.

MARY. [*Sitting down beside him and pointing to the wall of the house.*] See those leaves and flowers drying in the sun? There's medicine for every sort of sickness there, sir.

LUBIN. There's not a root nor yet a herb on the face of the earth that could cure the sickness I have within me.

MARY. That must be a terrible sort of a sickness, master.

LUBIN. So 'tis. 'Tis love.

MARY. Love?

LUBIN. Yes, love; wicked, unhappy love. Love what played false when riches fled. Love that has given the heart what was all mine to another.

[ISABEL *has been slowly approaching, she wears a cotton handkerchief over her head and carries a small bundle tied up in a cloth on her arm. Her movements are languid and sad.*

MARY. I know of flowers that can heal even the pains of love.

ISABEL. [*Coming forward and speaking earnestly.*] O tell me of them quickly, mistress.

MARY. Why, are you sick of the same complaint?

ISABEL. [*Sinking down on the grass at* MARY'S *feet.*] So bruised and wounded in the heart that the road from

Framilode up here might well have been a hundred miles or more.

LUBIN. Framilode ? 'Tis there you come from ?

ISABEL. I was servant at the inn down yonder. Close upon the ferry. Do you know the place, master ?

LUBIN. [*In deep gloom.*] Ah, the place and the ferry man too.

MARY. [*Leaning forward and clasping her hands.*] Him as is there to-day, or him who was ?

LUBIN. He who was there and left for foreign parts a good three year ago.

[ISABEL *covers her face and is shaken by sobs.*
LUBIN *leans his elbow on his knee, shading his eyes with his hand.*

MARY. I have help for all torments in my flowers. Such things be given us for that.

ISABEL. [*Looking up.*] You be gentle in your voice, mistress. 'Tis like when a quist do sing, as you speaks.

MARY. Then do both of you tell your sorrow. 'Twill be strange if I do not find sommat that will lighten your burdens for you.

LUBIN. 'Twas at Moat Farm I was born and bred.

MARY. Close up to Daniels yonder ?

LUBIN. The same. Rose-Anna of the Mill and I—we courted and was like to marry. But there came misfortune and I lost my all. She would not take a poor man, so I left these parts and got to be what you do see me now—just a day labourer.

ISABEL. Mine, 'tis the same tale, very nigh. Robert the ferry-man and me, we loved and was to have got us wedded, only there came a powerful rich gentleman what used to go fishing along of Robert. 'Twas he that 'ticed my lover off to foreign parts.

LUBIN. [*With a heavy sigh.*] These things are almost more than I can bear.

ISABEL. At first he wrote his letters very often. Then 'twas seldom like. Then 'twas never. And then there comed a day—

[*She is interrupted by her weeping.*

MARY. Try to get out your story—you can let the tears run afterwards if you have a mind.

ISABEL. There comed a day when I did meet a fisherman from Bristol. He brought me news of Robert back from the seas, clothed in fine stuff with money in the pockets of him, horse and carriage, and just about to wed.

LUBIN. Did he name the maid ?

ISABEL. Rose-Anna she was called, of Daniel's mill up yonder.

LUBIN. Rose-Anna—She with whom I was to have gone to church.

MARY. Here is a tangle worse nor any briar rose.

ISABEL. O 'twas such beautiful times as we did have down by the riverside, him and me.

LUBIN. She would sit, her hand in mine by the hour of a Sunday afternoon.

[*A pause during which* LUBIN *and* ISABEL *seem lost in their own sad memories.* MARY *gets up softly and goes within the cottage.*

ISABEL. And when I heared as 'twas to-morrow they were to wed, though 'twas like driving a knife deeper within the heart of me, I up and got me upon the road and did travel along by starlight and dawn and day just for one look upon his face again.

LUBIN. 'Twas so with me. From beyond Oxford town I am come to hurt myself worse than ever, by one sight of the eyes that have looked so cruel false into mine.

ISABEL. If I was to plead upon my knees to him 'twould do no good—poor wench of a serving maid like me.

LUBIN. [*Looking down at himself.*] She'd spurn me from the door were I to stand there knocking—in the coat I have upon me now. No—let her go her way and wed her fancy man.

[LUBIN *shades his eyes with one hand.* ISABEL *bows her head on her knees weeping.* MARY *comes out of the house carrying two glass bowls of water.*

MARY. Leave your sorrowful tears till later, my friends. This fresh water from the spring will revive you from your travelling.

LUBIN. [*Looking up.*] The heart of me is stricken past all remedy, mistress.

ISABEL. I could well lie me down and die.

[MARY *giving to each one a bowl from which they begin to drink slowly.*

MARY. I spoke as you do, once. My lover passed me by for another. A man may give all his love to the gilly flower, but 'tis the scarlet rose as takes his fancy come to-morrow.

ISABEL. And has your heart recovered from its sickness, mistress ?

MARY. [*Slowly.*] After many years.

LUBIN. And could you wed you to another ?

MARY. [*Still more slowly.*] Give the grass that has been trampled underfoot a bit of time, 'twill rise again. There's healing all around of us for every ill, did we but know it.

LUBIN. I'd give sommat to know where 'tis then.

MARY. There isn't a herb nor a leaf but what carries its message to them that are in pain.

ISABEL. Give me a bloom that'll put me to sleep for always, mistress.

MARY. There's evil plants as well, but 'tisn't a many. There's hen bane which do kill the fowls and fishes if they eat the seed of it. And there's water hemlock which lays dumbness upon man.

LUBIN. I've heard them tell of that, I have.

MARY. And of the good leaves there is hounds tongue. Wear it at the feet of you against dogs what be savage. Herb Benet you nail upon the door. No witch nor evil thing can enter to your house.

LUBIN. And have you naught that can deaden the stab of love upon the heart, mistress ?

ISABEL. [*Speaking in anguish.*] Aught that can turn our faithless lovers back again to we ?

MARY. That I have. See these small packages—you

that love Robert, take you this—and you who courted Rose-Anna, stretch out your hand.

[*She puts a small paper packet into the hands of each.*

LUBIN. [*Looking uncertainly at his packet.*] What'll this do for me, I'd like to know ?

MARY. 'Tis an unfailing charm. A powder from roses, fine as dust, and another seed as well. You put it in her glass of water—and the love comes back to you afore next sun-rise.

ISABEL. And will it be the same with I ?

MARY. You have the Herb of Robert there. Be careful of it. To-morrow at this hour, his heart will be all yours again, and you shall do what you will with it.

ISABEL. O I can't believe in this. 'Tis too good to be true, and that it be—A fine gentleman as Robert be now and a poor little wretch like me !

LUBIN. [*Slowly.*] 'Tis but a foolish dream like. How are folks like us to get mixing and messing with the drinks of they ? Time was when I did sit and eat along of them at the table, the same as one of theirselves. But now ! Why, they'd take and hound me away from the door.

ISABEL. And me too.

MARY. [*Breaking off a spray of the enchanters nightshade from the bunch drying.*] That'll bring luck, may be.

[ISABEL *takes it and puts it in her dress and then wraps the packet in her bundle.* LUBIN *puts his packet away also. Whilst they are doing this,* MARY *strolls a little way on the road.*

MARY. [*Returning.*] The man from Daniels be coming along.

LUBIN. [*Hastily.*] What, old Andrews ?

MARY. No. This is another. Folk do marvel how Miller John do have the patience to keep in with him.

LUBIN. How's that ?

MARY. So slow and heavy in his ways. But he can drink longer at the cider than any man in the county

afore it do fly to his head, and that's why master do put up with him.

[JEREMY *comes heavily towards them, a straw in his mouth. His hat is pushed to the back of his head. His expression is still and impassive. He comes straight towards* MARY, *then halts.*

MARY. Come, Jeremy, I reckon 'tis not for rue nor tea of marjoram you be come here this morning ?

JEREMY. [*Looking coldly and critically at the travellers and pointing to them.*] Who be they ?

MARY. Travellers on the road, seeking a bit of rest.

[JEREMY *continues to look them all over in silence.*

MARY. How be things going at the Mill to-day, Jerry ?

JEREMY. Powerful bad.

MARY. O I am grieved to hear of it. What has happened ?

[LUBIN *and* ISABEL *lean forward, listening eagerly.*

JEREMY. 'Tis a pretty caddle, that's all.

MARY. The mistress isn't took ill ? or Miss Kitty ?

JEREMY. I almost wish they was, for then there wouldn't be none of this here marrying to-morrow.

MARY. What has upset you against the wedding, Jerry ?

JEREMY. One pair of hands baint enough for such goings on.

MARY. 'Tis three you've got up there.

JEREMY. There you're mistook. Th'idle wench and the lad be both away—off afore dawn to the Fair and took their clothes along of they. I be left with all upon me like, and 'tis too much.

MARY. What shall you do, Jerry ?

JEREMY. I'll be blowed if I'm agoin' to do anything. There.

MARY. But you'll have to stir yourself up and deck the house and set the table and wait upon the visitors

and look to the traps and horses and all, Jerry—seeing as you're the only one.

JEREMY. I'll not. I'm not one as steps beyond my own work, and master do know it too.

MARY. Then how are they going to manage ?

JEREMY. I'm out to find them as'll manage for them. [*Turning sharply to* LUBIN.] Be you in search of work, young man ?

LUBIN. I—I count as I've nothing particular in view.

JEREMY. [*Turning to* ISABEL.] And you, wench ?

ISABEL. [*Faintly.*] I've gone from the place where I was servant.

JEREMY. Then you'll come along of me—the both of you.

ISABEL. [*Shrinking.*] O no—I couldn't go among—among strangers.

JEREMY. I never takes no count of a female's vapours. You'll come along of me. You'll curl the mistress's hair and lace her gown and keep her tongue quiet—and you [*turning to* LUBIN] my man, will set the tables and wait upon the quality what we expect from Bristol town this dinner-time.

LUBIN. [*Angrily.*] I never waited on man nor woman in my life, and I'll not start now.

JEREMY. You will. I'm not agoin' a half mile further this warm morning. Back to the Mill you goes along of me, the two of you.

MARY. [*Looking fixedly at* ISABEL.] This is a chance for you, my dear. You'll not find a better.

JEREMY. Better ? I count as you'll not better this'n. Good money for your pains—victuals to stuff you proper, and cider, all you can drink on a summer's day. I count you'll not better that.

LUBIN. [*As though to himself.*] I could not go.

JEREMY. Some cattle want a lot of driving.

ISABEL. [*Timidly to* LUBIN.] If I go, could not you try and come along with me, master ?

LUBIN. You'll never have the heart to go through with it.

JEREMY. 'Tis a fine fat heart as her has within of she. Don't you go and put fancies into the head of her.

ISABEL. [*To* LUBIN.] I'll go if so be as you'll come along of me too.

[LUBIN *bends his head and remains thinking deeply.*

JEREMY. 'Tis thirsty work this hiring of men and wenches—I'll get me a drop of cider down at the Red Bull. Mayhap you'll be ready time I've finished.

MARY. I'll see that you're not kept waiting, Jeremy.

JEREMY. [*Turning back after he has started.*] What be they called, Mary ?

[MARY *looks doubtfully towards* LUBIN *and* ISABEL.

ISABEL. My name—they calls me Isabel.

JEREMY. [*Turning to* LUBIN.] And yourn ?

LUBIN. [*In confusion.*] I don't rightly recollect.

JEREMY. [*Impassively.*] 'Tis of no account, us'll call you William like the last one.

ISABEL. O, and couldn't I be called like the last one too ?

JEREMY. Then us'll call you Lucy. And a rare bad slut her was, and doubtless you'll not prove much worser.

[*He goes away.*

MARY. This is your chance. A good chance too—

LUBIN. They'll know the both of us. Love isn't never quite so dead but what a sound in the speech or a movement of the hand will bring some breath to it again.

ISABEL. You're right there, master—sommat'll stir in the hearts of them when they sees we—and 'tis from the door as us'll be chased for masking on them like this.

MARY. But not before the seeds of love have done their work. Come, Isabel; come, Lubin—I will so dress you that you shall not be recognised.

[MARY *goes indoors.* ISABEL *slowly rises and takes up her bundle.* LUBIN *remains seated, looking gloomily before him.*

ISABEL. Come, think what 'twill feel to be along of

our dear loves and look upon the forms of them and hear the notes of their voices once again.

LUBIN. That's what I am a-thinking of. 'Twill be hot iron drove right into the heart all the while. Ah, that's about it.

ISABEL. I'll gladly bear the pain.

LUBIN. [*After a pause.*] Then so will I. We'll go.

[*He raises his eyes to her face and then gets heavily up and follows her into the cottage.*

ACT II.—Scene 1.

The living room at Daniel's Mill. In the window ROSE-ANNA *is seated awkwardly sewing some bright ribbons on to a muslin gown.* KITTY *is moving about rapidly dusting chairs and ornaments which are in disorder about the room and* JOHN *stands with his back to the grate gravely surveying them.*

ROSE. [*Petulantly.*] Whatever shall we do, John! Me not dressed, everything no how, and them expected in less nor a half hour's time?

KITTY. There! I've finished a-dusting the chairs. Now I'll set them in their places.

ROSE. No one is thinking of me! Who's going to help me on with my gown and curl my hair like Robert was used to seeing me wear it at Aunt's?

KITTY. Did you have it different down at Bristol, Rose?

ROSE. Of course I did. 'Twouldn't do to be countrified in the town.

JOHN. Your hair's well enough like that. 'Tisn't of hair as anyone'll be thinking when they comes in, but of victuals. And how we're a-going to get the table and all fixed up in so short a time do fairly puzzle me.

KITTY. I'll do the table.

ROSE. No. You've got to help me with my gown. O that was a good-for-nothing baggage, leaving us in the lurch!

JOHN. Well, I've done my best to get us out of the fix.

ROSE. And what would that be, pray?

KITTY. Why John, you've done nothing but stand with your back to the grate this last hour.

JOHN. I've sent off Jerry.

ROSE. [*Scornfully.*] Much good that'll do.

KITTY. We know just how far Jerry will have gone.

JOHN. I told him not to shew hisself unless he could bring a couple of servants back along with him.

ROSE. [*Angrily.*] You're more foolish than I took you to be, John. Get you off at once and fetch Jerry from his cider at the Red Bull. He's not much of a hand about the house, but he's better than no one.

JOHN. [*Sighing heavily.*] Jeremy's not the man to start his drinking so early in the day.

ROSE. I've caught him at the cask soon after dawn.

KITTY. And so have I, John. How you put up with his independent ways I don't know.

JOHN. Ah, 'tisn't everyone as has such a powerful strong head as Jerry's. He's one that can be trusted to take his fill, and none the worse with him afterwards.

[*A knock at the door, which is pushed open by* JEREMY.

JEREMY. [*From the doorway.*] Well, Master John—well, mistress?

ROSE. [*Sharply.*] Master was just starting out for to fetch you home, Jerry.

JEREMY. [*Ignoring her.*] Well, master, I've brought a couple back along of me.

ROSE. Ducklings or chickens?

JEREMY. I've gotten them too.

KITTY. Do you mean that you've found some servants for us, Jerry?

JEREMY. Two outside. Female and male.

JOHN. Didn't I tell you so! There's naught that Jerry cannot do. You'll have a drink for this, my man.

ROSE. You may take my word he's had that already, John.

JEREMY. I have, mistress. Whilst they was a packing up the poultry in my basket. Down at the Bull.

ROSE. What sort of a maid is it ?

JEREMY. Ah, 'tis for you to tell me that, mistress, when you've had her along of you a bit.

ROSE. And the man ?

JEREMY. Much the same as any other male.

ROSE. [*Impatiently.*] Do you step outside, John, and have a look at them, and if they're suitable bring them in and we'll set them about their work.

[JOHN *goes out.* KITTY *peers through the window.*

JEREMY. I reckon I can go off and feed the hilts now. 'Tis the time.

ROSE. Feed the hilts ! Indeed you can't do no such thing. O I'm mad with vexation that nothing is well ordered or suitably prepared for Mr. Robert and his fine cousins from Bristol town. Whatever will they say to such a house when they do see it ?

JEREMY. I'm sure I don't know.

KITTY. [*From the window.*] I see the new servants. John is bringing them up the walk. The man's face is hid by his broad hat, but the girl looks neat enough in her cotton gown and sun-bonnet.

[JOHN *comes into the room, followed by* LUBIN *and* ISABEL. LUBIN *shuffles off his hat, but holds it between his face and the people in the room.*

JEREMY. [*Pointing to them and speaking to* ROSE.] There you are, mistress—man-servant and maid.

ROSE. What do we know about them ? Folk picked up by Jerry at the Red Bull.

JEREMY. No, from the roadside.

ROSE. Worser far.

JOHN. No, no, Rose. These young persons were spoken for by Mary Meadows. And 'tis rare fortunate for we to obtain their services at short notice like this.

ROSE. [*To* ISABEL.] What are you called, my girl ?

ISABEL. [*Faintly.*] Isabel is my name, but I'd sooner you called me Lucy.

ROSE. And that I will. My tongue is used to Lucy. The other is a flighty, fanciful name for a servant.

KITTY. And what is the man called, John ?

LUBIN. [*Harshly.*] I am called William.

KITTY. William and Lucy ! Like the ones that ran away this morning.

ROSE. O do not let us waste any more time ! Jerry, do you take the man and shew him his work in the back kitchen ; and Lucy, come to me and help me with my gown and my hair dressing. We have not a minute to lose.

KITTY. They may be upon us any time now. I'll go out and gather the flowers for the parlour, since you don't want me any more within, Rose.

JOHN. And I'll get and finish Jeremy's work in the yard. 'Tis upside down and round about and no how to-day. But we'll come out of it some time afore next year I reckon.

JEREMY. Don't you ever go for to get married, master. There could never come a worser caddle into a man's days nor matrimony, I count.

[JOHN, *on his way to the door, pauses—as though momentarily lost in thought.*

JOHN. Was Mary Meadows asked to drop in at any time to-day, Rose ?

ROSE. [*Who is taking up her gown and ribbons to show to* ISABEL, *and speaking crossly.*] I'm sure I don't know, nor care. I've enough to think about as 'tis.

KITTY. [*Taking* JOHN'S *arm playfully.*] You're terribly took up with Mary Meadows, John.

JOHN. There isn't many like her, Kitty. She do rear herself above t'others as—as a good wheat stalk from out the rubbish.

[JOHN *and* KITTY *go slowly out.*

JEREMY. [*As though to himself.*] I sees as how I shall have to keep an eye on master—[*turning to* LUBIN

and signing to him.] But come, my man, us has no time for romance, 'tis dish washing as lies afore you now.

[LUBIN *jerks his head haughtily and makes a protesting gesture. Then he seems to remember himself and follows* JEREMY *humbly from the room.* ROSE *takes up some ribbons and laces.*

ROSE. [*To* ISABEL, *who is standing near.*] Now, Lucy, we must look sharp; Mister Robert and his cousins from Bristol town will soon be here. I have not met with the cousins yet, but I've been told as they're very fine ladies—They stood in place of parents to my Robert, you know. 'Tis unfortunate we should be in such a sad muddle the day they come.

ISABEL. When I have helped you into your gown, mistress, I shall soon have the dinner spread and all in order. I be used to such work, and I'm considered spry upon my feet.

ROSE. 'Tis more serious that you should be able to curl my hair in the way that Mr. Robert likes.

ISABEL. [*Sadly.*] I don't doubt but that I shall be able to do that too, mistress.

ROSE. Very well. Take the gown and come with me up to my room.

[*They go out together,* ISABEL *carrying the gown.*

ACT II.—Scene 2.

The same room. The table is laid for dinner and ISABEL *is putting flowers upon it.* LUBIN *wearing his hat, enters with large jugs of cider, which he sets upon a side table.*

ISABEL. [*Looking up from her work.*] Shall us ever have the heart to go on with it, Master Lubin ?

LUBIN. [*Bitterly.*] Do not you "Master" me,

Isabel. I'm only a common servant in the house where once I was lover and almost brother.

ISABEL. [*Coming up to him.*] O do not take it so hard, Lubin—Us can do naught at this pass but trust what the young woman did tell me.

LUBIN. [*Gloomily.*] The sight of Rose has stirred up my love so powerful that I do hardly know how to hold the tears back from my eyes.

ISABEL. [*Pressing her eyes with her apron.*] What'll it be for me when Robert comes in ?

LUBIN. We'll have to help one another, Isabel, in the plight where we stand.

ISABEL. That's it. And perchance as them seeds'll do the rest.

[*They spring apart as a sound of voices and laughter is heard outside.*

KITTY. [*Runs in.*] They've come. All of them. And do you know that Robert's cousins are no fine ladies at all, as he said, but just two common old women dressed grand-like.

ISABEL. That will be a sad shock to poor mistress.

KITTY. O, she is too much taken up with Mister Robert to notice yet. But quick ! They are all sharp set from the drive. Fetch in the dishes, William and Lucy.

ISABEL. All shall be ready in a moment, Miss Kitty.

[*She goes hurriedly out followed by* LUBIN. KITTY *glances round the room and then stands at the side of the front door.* JOHN, *giving an arm to each of* ROBERT'S *cousins, enters. The cousins are dressed in coloured flowered dresses, and wear bonnets that are heavy with bright plumes. They look cumbered and ill at ease in their clothes, and carry their sunshades and gloves awkwardly.*

LIZ. [*Looking round her.*] Very comfortable, I'm sure. But I count as that there old-fashioned grate do take a rare bit of elbow grease.

JANE. Very pleasant indeed. But I didn't reckon as the room would be quite the shape as 'tis.

LIZ. Come to that, I didn't expect the house to look as it do.

JANE. Very ancient in appearance, I'm sure.

JOHN. Ah, the house has done well enough for me and my father and grandfather afore me.

[ROSE, *very grandly dressed, comes in hanging on* ROBERT'S *arm.* ROBERT *is clothed in the fashion of the town.*

ROSE. Please to remove your bonnet, Miss Eliza. Please to remove yours, Miss Jane.

JOHN. [*Heartily.*] Ah, that's so—'Twill be more homely like for eating.

ROSE. There's a glass upon the wall.

LIZ. I prefer to remain as I be.

JANE. Sister and me have our caps packed up in the tin box.

KITTY. [*Bringing the tin box from the doorway.*] Shall I take you upstairs to change? Dinner's not quite ready yet.

LIZ. That will suit us best, I'm sure. Come, sister.

[KITTY *leads the way out, followed by both sisters.*

JOHN. I'll just step outside and see that Jerry's tending to the horse.

[*He hurries out, and* ROBERT *is left alone with* ROSE.

ROSE. [*Coming towards him and holding out her hands.*] O, Robert, is it the same between us as it was last time?

ROBERT. [*Looking at her critically.*] You've got your hair different or something.

ROSE. [*Putting her hand to her head.*] The new maid. A stupid country wench.

ROBERT. You've got my meaning wrong. 'Tis that I've never seen you look so well before.

ROSE. O dear Robert!

ROBERT. You've got my fancy more than ever, Rose.

ROSE. O, I'm so happy to be going off with you to-morrow, and I love it down at Bristol. Robert, I'm tired and sick of country life.

ROBERT. We'll make a grand fine lady of you there, Rose.

ROSE. [*A little sharply.*] Am I not one in looks already, Robert ?

ROBERT. You're what I do dote upon. I can't say no more.

[LUBIN *and* ISABEL *enter carrying dishes, which they set upon the table.* ROBERT *and* ROSE *turn their backs to them and look out into the garden. The staircase door is opened, and* LIZ, JANE *and* KITTY *come into the room.* LIZ *and* JANE *are wearing gaudy caps trimmed with violet and green ribbons.*

ROSE. We'll sit down, now. John won't be a moment before he's here.

[*She sits down at one end of the table and signs to* ROBERT *to place himself next to her. The sisters and* KITTY *seat themselves.* JOHN *comes hurriedly in.*

JOHN. That's right. Everyone in their places ? But no cover laid for Mary ?

ROSE. [*Carelessly.*] We can soon have one put, should she take it into her head to drop in.

JOHN. That's it. Now ladies, now Robert—'tis thirsty work a-driving upon the Bristol road at mid-summer. We'll lead off with a drink of home-made cider. The eating'll come sweeter afterwards.

ROBERT. That's it, Miller.

[LUBIN *and* ISABEL *come forward and take the cider mugs from each place to the side table, where* LUBIN *fills them from a large jug. In the mugs of* ROSE-ANNA *and* ROBERT, ISABEL *shakes the contents of the little packets. Whilst they are doing this the following talk is carried on at the table.*

LIZ [*Taking up a spoon.*] Real plated, sister.

JANE. Upon my word, so 'tis.

ROSE. And not so bright as I should wish to see it neither. I've had a sad trouble with my maids of late.

LIZ. Sister and I don't keep none of them, thank goodness.

JANE. We does our work with our own hands. We'd be ashamed if 'twas otherwise.

ROBERT. [*Scowling at them.*] I've been and engaged a house-full of servants for Rose-Anna. She shall know what 'tis to live like a lady once she enters our family.

JOHN. Servants be like green fly on the bush. They do but spoil th' home and everything they do touch. All save one.

KITTY. And that one's Jerry, I suppose.

JOHN. You're right there, Kitty, that you are. A harder head was never given to man than what Jerry do carry twixt his shoulders.

[LUBIN *and* ISABEL *here put round the mugs of cider, and everyone drinks thirstily.* ISABEL *stands behind the chairs of* ROSE *and* ROBERT *and* LUBIN *at* JOHN'S *side.*

ROBERT. [*Setting down his mug.*] There's a drink what can't be got in foreign parts.

ROSE. [*Looking fondly at him.*] Let the maid fill your mug again, my dear one.

ROBERT. [*Carelessly handing it to* ISABEL.] I don't mind if I do have another swill.

[ISABEL *fills the mug and puts it by his side.*

LIZ. As good as any I ever tasted.

JANE. Couldn't better it at the King's Head up our way.

JOHN. Good drink—plenty of it. Now we'll start upon the meat I reckon.

[*He takes up a knife and fork and begins to carve, and* LUBIN *hands round plates. During this* ROBERT'S *gaze restlessly wanders about the room, finally fixing itself on* ISABEL, *who presently goes out to the back kitchen with plates.*

ROBERT. The new serving maid you've got there, Rose, should wear a cap and not her bonnet.

ROSE. How sharp you are to notice anything.

ROBERT. A very pretty looking wench, from what I can see.

ROSE. [*Speaking more to the cousins than to* ROBERT.] O she's but a rough and untrained girl got in all of a hurry. Not at all the sort I've been used to in this house, I can tell you.

[ISABEL *comes back with fresh plates and stands at the side table.*

LIZ. [*To* JANE.] A mellower piece of pig meat I never did taste, sister.

JANE. I'm sorry I went and took the poultry.

KITTY. John will carve you some ham if you'd like to try it, Miss Jane.

JANE. I'm sure I'm much obliged.

[JEREMY *comes in.*]

JEREMY. [*Coming to the back of* JANE'S *chair.*] Don't you get mixing of your meats is what I says. Commence with ham and finish with he. That's what do suit the inside of a delicate female.

JANE. [*Looking up admiringly.*] Now that's just what old Uncle he did used to say.

JEREMY. Old uncle did know what he was a-talking about then.

LIZ. [*Warming and looking less awkward and ill at ease.*] 'Twas the gout what kept Uncle so low in his eating, 'twas not th' inclination of him.

JEREMY. Ah 'twouldn't be the gout nor any other disease as would keep me from a platter of good food.

JOHN. Nor from your mug of drink neither, Jerry.

[JEREMY *laughs and moves off to the side table.*

LIZ. A very pleasant sort of man.

JANE. I do like anyone what's homely.

JOHN. [*Calling out heartily.*] Do you listen to that, Jerry! The ladies here do find you pleasant and homely, and I don't know what else.

JEREMY. The mugs want filling once more.

[*He stolidly goes round the table refilling the mugs.* ROSE'S *gaze wanders about her.*

ROSE. [*To* ROBERT.] That's not a bad looking figure of a man—

ROBERT. Who ?

ROSE. Well—the new farm hand.

ROBERT. A sulky looking brute. I'd not let him wear his hat to table if I was master here.

ROSE. He puts me in mind of—well—there, I can't recollect who 'tis. [*A knock is heard at the door.*

ROSE. [*Sharply to* ISABEL.] Go and see who 'tis, Lucy.

[ISABEL *opens the door, and* MARY MEADOWS *stands on the threshold, a large nosegay of beautiful wild flowers in her hand.*

JOHN. [*Rising up in great pleasure.*] You're late, Mary. But you're welcome as the—as the very sunshine.

ROSE. Set another place, Lucy.

MARY. Not for me, Rose. I did not come here to eat or drink, but to bring you these few blossoms and my love.

ROSE. [*Rises from the table and takes the nosegay.* I'm sure you're very kind, Mary—Suppose we were all to move into the parlour now we have finished dinner, and then we could enjoy a bit of conversation.

LIZ. Very pleasant, I'm sure.

JANE. I see no objection.

KITTY. [*Running round to look at the flowers.*] And Mary shall tell us how to make charms out of the flowers —and the meanings of the blossoms and all the strange things she knows about them.

JOHN. [*Taking a flower from the bunch and putting it into his coat.*] Yes, and how to brew tea as'll curl up anyone's tongue within the mouth for a year—and fancy drinks for sheep with foot rot, and powders against the murrain and any other nonsense that you do please.

MARY. Now, John, I'll not have you damage my business like this.

LIZ. Maybe as the young person's got sommat what'll be handy with your complaint, sister.

JANE. Or for when you be took with th'air in your head so bad, Jane.

ROSE. Yes, I reckon that Mary has a charm for every ill beneath the sun. Let's go off to the parlour along of her. You're not coming with us, John, are you?

JOHN. I'd not miss the telling of these things for anything in the world, foolishness though they be.

ROSE. Come along then—all of you.

[*They all go out.* JEREMY *holds the door open for them. As she passes through it* LIZ *says, looking at him.*

LIZ. We shall hope for your company, too.

JANE. To be sure, mister.

JEREMY. [*Haughtily.*] I bain't one for parlours, nor charms, ma'am. I be here for another purpose.

[*They leave the room.*

JEREMY. [*Having watched the party out, moves towards the cider jug.*] Now, my man, now, my wench—us'll see what can be done with the victuals and drink they've been and left. 'Tis a fair heavy feed and drink as I do need. Sommat as'll lift me up through all the trials of this here foolish matrimony and stuff.

[*He raises the jug of cider to his mouth as the Curtain falls.*

ACT III.—Scene 1.

The next morning. ROBERT'S *cousins are standing by the fire-place of the same room.*

LIZ. 'Tis powerful unhomely here, Jane.

JANE. And that 'tis. I wish as Robert had never brought us along of him.

LIZ. She's a stuck-up jay of a thing what he's about to wed if ever I seed one.

JANE. That her be. He'll live to wish hisself dead and buried one day.

LIZ. There bain't but one sensible tongue in the whole place to my mind.

JANE. Ah, he's a man to anyone's liking, sister.

LIZ. 'Tis homelike as he do make I to feel among all these strangers.

JANE. Here he comes.

[JEREMY *with a yoke and two pails stands at the doorway.*

LIZ. Now do you come in, mister, and have a bit of talk along of we.

JANE. Set down them pails and do as sister says, Mister Jeremy.

[JEREMY *looks them all over and then slowly and deliberately sets down his pails.*

LIZ. That's right, sister and me was feeling terribly lonesome here this morning.

JANE. And we was wishing as we'd never left home to come among all these stranger folk.

LIZ. Not that we feels you to be a stranger, dear Mister Jeremy.

JANE. You be a plain homely man such as me and sister be accustomed to.

JEREMY. Anything more ?

LIZ. I suppose you've put by a tidy bit—seeing as you be of a certain age.

JANE. Although your looks favour you well, don't they, sister ?

LIZ. To be sure they do.

JANE. And I reckon as you could set up a home of your own any day, mister.

JEREMY. [*Pointing through the window.*] See that there roof against the mill ?

LIZ. Indeed I do.

JEREMY. That's where I do live.

[*Both sisters move quickly to the window.*

JANE. A very comfortable looking home indeed.

LIZ. I likes the looks of it better nor this great old house.

JANE. [*Archly.*] Now I daresay there's but one thing wanted over there, Mister Jeremy.

JEREMY. What's that ?

JANE. A good wife to do and manage for you.

JEREMY. I never was done for nor managed by a female yet, and blowed if I will be now.

LIZ. [*Shaking her finger at him.*] Sister an' me knows what comes of such words, don't us, sister ? 'Tis an old saying in our family as one wedding do make a many.

JEREMY. Give me a woman's tongue for foolishness. I've heared a saying too in my family, which be—get a female on to your hearth and 'tis Bedlam straight away.

JANE. Now, sister, did you ever hear the like of that ?

LIZ. Us'll have to change his mind for him, Jane.

JEREMY. I reckon 'twould take a rare lot of doing to change that, mistress.

JANE. Bain't you a-goin' to get yourself ready for church soon ?

JEREMY. Dashed if I ever heard tell of such foolishness. Who's to mind the place with all the folk gone fiddle-faddling out ?

LIZ. There's the man William.

JEREMY. I bain't a-goin' to leave the place to a stranger.

JANE. Why, sister, us'll feel lost and lonesome without mister, shan't us, Liz ?

LIZ. That us will. What if us stayed at home and helped to mind the house along of he ?

JANE. [*Slowly.*] And did not put our new gowns upon the backs of we after all the money spent ?

JEREMY. Ah, there you be. 'Tis the same with all females. Creatures of vanity—even if they be got a bit long in the tooth. 'Tis all the same.

[JANE *and* LIZ *draw themselves up, bridling, but* LIZ *relaxes.*

LIZ. He must have his little joke, sister, man-like, you know.

[JOHN *enters.*]

JOHN. Jerry, and I've been seeking you everywhere.

Come you off to the yard. 'Tis as much as we shall do to be ready afore church time. I never knew you to idle in the house afore.

JEREMY. [*Taking up his pails, sarcastically.*] 'Twas the females as tempted I, master, but 'twon't occur again, so there. [*He hurries off, followed by* JOHN.

LIZ. [*With dignity.*] Us'll go upstairs and dress, sister.

JANE. 'Tis time we did so. All them new-fashioned things be awkward in the fastenings.

[*They go upstairs.*

[ROBERT *and* ROSE *come in from the garden.* ROBERT *carries a little card-board box in his hand, which he places on the table.* ROSE *sits down listlessly on a chair leaning her arms on the table.*

ROBERT. [*Undoing the box.*] This is the bouquet what I promised to bring from town.

ROSE. [*Her gaze wandering outside.*] Well, we might as well look at it afore I go to dress.

[ROBERT *uncovers the box and takes out a small bouquet of white flowers surrounded by a lace frill.*

ROSE. [*Taking it from him carelessly and raising it to her face.*] Why, they are false ones.

ROBERT. [*Contemptuously.*] My good girl, who ever went to church with orange blossom that was real, I'd like to know ?

ROSE. [*Languidly dropping the bouquet on the table.*] I'm sure I don't care. I reckon that one thing's about as good as another to be married with.

ROBERT. [*Going to the window and looking out.*] Ah —I daresay 'tis so.

ROSE. I feel tired of my wedding day already—that I do.

ROBERT. There's a plaguey, fanciful kind of feel about the day, what a man's hardly used to, so it seems to me.

ROSE. [*Wildly.*] O, I reckon we may get used to it in time afore we die.

ROBERT. Now—if 'twas with the right——

ROSE. Right what, Robert ?

ROBERT. [*Confused.*] I hardly know what I was a-going to say, Rose. Suppose you was to take up your flowers and go to dress yourself. We might as well get it all over and finished with.

ROSE. [*Rising slowly.*] Perhaps 'twould be best. I'll go to my room, and you might call the girl Lucy and send her up to help me with my things.

ROBERT. Won't you take the bouquet along of you ?

ROSE. No—let it bide there. I can have it later.

[*She goes slowly from the room.*

[*Left to himself,* ROBERT *strolls to the open door and looks gloomily out on the garden. Suddenly his face brightens.*

ROBERT. Lucy, Lucy, come you in here a moment.

LUCY. [*From outside.*] I be busy just now hanging out my cloths, master.

ROBERT. Leave your dish cloths to dry themselves. Your mistress wants you, Lucy.

LUCY. [*Coming to the door.*] Mistress wants me, did you say ?

ROBERT. Yes, you've got to go and dress her for the church. But you can spare me a minute or two first.

ISABEL. [*Going quickly across the room to the staircase door.*] Indeed, that is what I cannot do, master. 'Tis late already.

ROBERT. [*Catches her hand and pulls her back.*] I've never had a good look at your face yet, my girl—you act uncommon coy, and that you do.

ISABEL. [*Turning her head away and speaking angrily.*] Let go of my hand, I tell you. I don't want no nonsense of that sort.

ROBERT. Lucy, your voice do stir me in a very uncommon fashion, and there's sommat about the appearance of you——

ISABEL. Let go of me, master. Suppose as anyone should look through the window.

ROBERT. Let them look. I'd give a good bit for all the world to see us now.

ISABEL. O, whatever do you mean by that, Mister Robert ?

ROBERT. What I say. 'Tis with you as I'd be going along to church this morning. Not her what's above.

ISABEL. But I wouldn't go with you—No, not for all the gold in the world.

ROBERT. Ah, you've changed since yesterday. When I caught your eye at dinner, 'twas gentle as a dove's—and your hand, when it gave me my mug of cider did seem—well did seem to put a caress upon me like.

ISABEL. O there lies a world of time twixt yesterday and to-day, Master Robert.

ROBERT. So it do seem. For to-day 'tis all thorns and thistles with you—But I'm a-goin' to have my look at your pretty face and my kiss of it too.

ISABEL. I shall scream out loud if you touches me—that I shall.

ROBERT. [*Pulling her to him.*] Us'll see about that.

[*He tries to get a sight of her face, but she twists and turns. Finally he seizes both her hands and covers them with kisses as* KITTY *enters.*

KITTY. O whatever's going on ! Rose, Rose, John—come you in here quickly, do. [*To* LUCY.] O you bad, wicked girl. I knew you couldn't be a very nice servant brought in off the road by Jeremy.

[ISABEL, *released by* ROBERT, *goes over to the window arranging her disordered sun-bonnet and trying to hide her tears.* ROBERT *watches her sullenly.*

KITTY. [*Goes to the staircase door and calls loudly.*] Rose, Rose—come you down as quick as you can run.

ROSE. [*Coming down.*] What's all this, I'd like to know ?

KITTY. It's Lucy, behaving dreadful—O you must send her straight away from the house, Rose.

ROSE. What has she done, then ?

KITTY. Going on with Robert. Flirting, Rose, and kissing.

ISABEL. O no, mistress, twasn't so, I do swear to you.

ROBERT. [*Brutally.*] Yes 'twas. The maid so put me powerful in mind of someone who—who—

ROSE. [*Coldly.*] I understand you, Robert. Well, 'tis lucky that all this didn't come off an hour or so later.

KITTY. [*Tearfully.*] O Rose, what do you mean ?

ROSE. I mean that what's not broken don't need no mending. Robert can go to church with someone else to-day, he can. And no harm done.

[*She takes up the bunch of orange flowers and begins pulling it to pieces and throwing it all about the room.*

KITTY. O Rose, Rose, don't take it so hard. 'Twasn't Robert's fault. 'Twas the girl off the road what led him on. I know it. Tell her to get out of the house. I'll dress you—I'll do the work. Only be just and sensible again ; dear Rose.

ROSE. Let the girl bide. It makes no difference to me. There'll be no marrying for me to-day.

[JOHN *comes in at the door.*

KITTY. [*Running to him.*] O John, John—do you quiet down Rose and tell her to get upstairs and dress. She's a-saying that she won't marry Robert because of his goings on with the new servant—But, O, you'll talk her into reason again, won't you, dear John ?

JOHN. Come, come, what's all this cackle about, Rose ?

ROSE. I'm breaking off with Robert, that's all, John.

JOHN. Robert, can't you take and explain a bit what 'tis.

ROBERT. [*Sullenly.*] A little bit of play 'twixt me and the wench there, and that's about all, I reckon.

JOHN. Now that's an unsensible sort of thing to get doing on your marriage day, to my thinking.

KITTY. 'Twasn't Robert's fault, I know. 'Twas the maid off the road who started it.

[*Here* ISABEL *sinks down on a chair by the window, leaning her arms on the table and bowing her head, in tears.*

JOHN. [*Going to the door.*] Jeremy—Jeremy—come you in here a minute.

[*Instead of* JEREMY, LUBIN *comes in.*

JOHN. 'Twas Jeremy I did call—not you.

LUBIN. He's gone off the place for a few minutes.

JOHN. [*Vexedly.*] Ah, 'tis early for the Red Bull.

LUBIN. Can I—can I do anything for you, master?

JOHN. Not unless you can account for the sort of serving wench off the roadside what Jerry has put upon us.

LUBIN. What is there to account for in her, master?

ROSE. [*Passionately.*] O I don't particular mind about what's happened. Let her kiss with Robert if she has the mind. 'Tis always the man who commences.

JOHN. 'Tis not. There are some wenches who don't know how to leave anyone alone. Worser than cattle flies, that sort.

ISABEL. [*Going across the room to* LUBIN'S *side.*] O you shame me by them words, I bain't that sort of maid —you'll answer for me—William?

[LUBIN *silently takes her hand.*

ROSE. [*Her eyes fixed on* LUBIN.] I'll tell you what, John; I'll tell you, Kitty. I wish I'd held me to my first lover and I wish 'twas with Lubin that I was a-going to the church to-day.

ROBERT. [*Sullenly.*] Then I'll say sommat, Rose. I wish 'twas with Isabel that I was getting wed.

JOHN. Now, now—'Tis like two children a quarrelling over their playthings. Suppose you was to go and get yourself dressed, Rose-Anna—And you too, Robert. Why, the traps will be at the door afore you're ready if you don't quicken yourselves up a bit. Kitty, you go and help your sister.

ROSE. [*With a jealous glance at Isabel.*] No, I'll have Lucy with me.

JOHN. That's it, you keep her out of mischief

KITTY. I've got my own dress to put on.

JOHN. And Robert, you and me will have a drink after all this caddle. 'Tis dry work getting ready for marriage so it appears.

ROBERT. 'Tis fiery dry to my thinking.

ROSE. [*Crossing the room and going up to* LUBIN.] I have no flowers to take to church with me, William; go you to the waterside, I have a mind to carry some of the blue things what grow there.

KITTY. Forget-me-nots, you mean!

ROSE. Forget-me-nots, I mean. And none but you to gather them for me, William. Because—because—well, you do put me in thoughts of someone that I once held and now have lost. That's all.

Curtain.

ACT III.—Scene 2.

The same room half an hour later. ISABEL *is picking up the scattered orange blossom which she ties together and lays on the window sill.* LUBIN *comes in with a large bunch of river forget-me-nots.*

LUBIN. I didn't think to find you here, Isabel.

ISABEL. O but that is a beautiful blue flower. I will take the bunch upstairs. She is all dressed and ready for it.

LUBIN. [*Putting it on the table.*] No—do you bide a moment here with me.

[ISABEL *looks helplessly at* LUBIN *who takes her hands slowly in his.*

LUBIN. What are we going to do?

ISABEL. I wish as we had never touched the seeds.

LUBIN. O cursed seeds of love—Far better to have left all as 'twas yesterday in the morning.

ISABEL. He has followed me like my shadow, courting and courting me hard and all the time, Lubin.

LUBIN. She sought me out in the yard at day-break, and what I'd have given twenty years of life for yester eve I could have thrown into the stream this morning.

ISABEL. [*Sadly.*] So 'tis with my feelings.

LUBIN. She has altered powerful, to my fancy, in these years.

ISABEL. And Robert be differenter too from what I do remember. [*A long silence.*

LUBIN. Have you thought as it might be in us two these changes have come about, Isabel?

ISABEL. I was just the maid as ever I was until—

LUBIN. And so was I unchanged, until I started travelling up on the same road as you, Isabel.

[*For a few minutes they look gravely into one another's eyes.*

LUBIN. [*Taking* ISABEL'S *hands.* So that's how 'tis with you and me.

ISABEL. O Lubin—a poor serving maid like I am.

LUBIN. I'll have no one else in the whole world.

ISABEL. What could I have seen in him, times gone by?

LUBIN. And was it ever true that I did sit through a long Sunday her hand in mine? [*Another silence.*

ISABEL. But how's us ever to get out of the caddle where we be?

LUBIN. [*Gaily.*] We'll just run away off to the Fair as t'other servants did.

ISABEL. And leave them in their hate for one another? No—'twould be too cruel. Us'll run to the young mistress what knows all about them herbs. I count as there be seeds or sommat which could set the hearts of them two back in the right places again. Come—

LUBIN. Have it your own way then. But 'twill have to be done very quickly if 'tis done at all.

ISABEL. Us'll fly over the ground like.

[*She puts her hand impetuously in* LUBIN'S *and they go out together. As they do so,* ISABEL'S *bonnet falls from her head and lies unheeded on the floor.*

ACT III.—Scene 3.

A few minutes later. LIZ *and* JANE *wearing gay sprigged dresses and feathered bonnets, come to the room. They carry fans and handkerchiefs in their hands. It is seen that their gowns are not fastened at the back.*

LIZ. Such a house I never heard tell of. Ring, ring at the bell and no one to come nigh.

JANE. Being unused to bells, sister, maybe as us did pull them wrong or sommat.

LIZ. I wish we'd had the gowns made different.

JANE. To do up in the front—sensible like.

[*They twist and turn in front of the glass on the wall, absorbed in their dress, they do not notice that* JEREMY *has come in and is watching them sarcastically.*

JEREMY. Being as grey as th' old badger don't keep a female back from vanity.

LIZ. O dear, Master Jeremy, what a turn you did give me, to be sure.

JANE. We can't find no one in this house to attend upon we.

JEREMY. I count as you can not. Bain't no one here.

LIZ. We rang for the wench a many time.

JEREMY. Ah, and you might ring.

JANE. We want someone as'll fasten them niggly hooks to our gowns.

JEREMY. Ah, and you may want.

LIZ. Our sight bain't clear enough to do one for t'other, the eyelets be made so small.

JEREMY. Count as you'll have to go unfastened then.

JANE. O now you be a laughing at us. Call the wench down, or we shall never be ready in time.

JEREMY. Man and maid be both gone off. Same as t'others, us'll have to do without service.

LIZ. Gone off!

JANE. Runned clean away?

JEREMY. That's about it.

JANE. Well now, sister, us'll have to ask the little Miss to help we.

JEREMY. I've harnessed the mare a many time. Don't see why I shouldn't get the both of you fixed into the shafts like.

LIZ and JANE. [*Fanning themselves coyly.*] O Master Jeremy—

JEREMY. Come now. Let's have a try. I count as no one have a steadier hand nor me this side of the river, nor a finer eye for seeing as everything be in its place. I'll settle the both of you afore I gets out the horse and trap. Turn round.

[*The sisters turn awkwardly, and with very self-conscious airs begin to flutter their fans.* JEREMY *quickly hooks each gown in succession. As he finishes the fastening of* JANE'S *dress* ROSE, *followed by* KITTY, *comes into the room. She is wearing her bridal gown and veil.*

ROSE. [*Pausing.*] What's this, Jeremy?

JEREMY. The servants be runned away same as t'others—that's all, mistress.

ROSE. Run away?

JEREMY. So I do reckon. Bain't anywhere about the place.

ROSE. [*Flinging herself down on a chair by the table, in front of the bunch of forget-me-nots.*] Let them be found. Let them be brought back at once.

KITTY. For my part I'm glad they've gone off. The girl was a wild, bad thing. I saw how she went on with Robert.

ROSE. [*Brokenly to* JEREMY.] You found them. Bring them back, Jerry.

KITTY. No—wait till you and Robert are made man and wife, Rose. Then 'twon't matter quite so much.

ROSE. I'll never wed me to Robert, I'll only wed me to him who gathered these blue flowers here.

KITTY. Good heavens, Rose, 'twas the man William.

[KITTY *looks in consternation from* ROSE *to the cousins and then to* JEREMY, *who remains impassive and uninterested, sucking a straw.* ROSE *clasps her hands round the forget-me-nots and sits gazing at them, desolately unhappy.* ROBERT *enters. He is very grandly dressed for the wedding, but as he comes into the room he sees* ISABEL'S *cotton bonnet on the floor. He stoops, picks it up and laying it reverently on the table, sinks into a chair opposite* ROSE *and raising one of its ribbons, kisses this with passion.*

ROBERT. There—I'd not change this for a thousand sacks of gold—I swear I'd not.

KITTY. Now Robert—get up, the two of you. Are you bewitched or sommat—O Jerry, stir them, can't you.

LIZ. Robert, 'tisn't hardly suitable—with the young miss so sweetly pretty in her white gown.

JANE. And wedding veil and all. And sister and me hooked up into our new sprigs, ready for the ceremony.

JEREMY. [*Looking at them with cold contempt.*] Let them bide. The mush'll swim out of they same as 'twill swim off the cider vat Just let the young fools bide.

KITTY. O this'll never do. Jerry forgetting of his manners and all. [*Calling at the garden door.*] John, John, come you here quickly, there's shocking goings on. [JOHN, *in best clothes comes in.*

JOHN. What's the rattle now, Kitty? I declare I

might be turning round on top of my own mill wheel such times as these.

KITTY. Rose says she won't wed Robert, and Robert's gone off his head all along of that naughty servant maid.

[JOHN *stands contemplating* ROSE *and* ROBERT. ROSE *seems lost to the outside world and is gazing with tears at her forget-me-nots, whilst* ROBERT, *in sullen gloom, keeps his eyes fixed on the sun-bonnet.*

JOHN. Come, Rose, 'tis time you commenced to act a bit different. [ROSE *does not answer.*

JOHN. Come, Robert, if you play false to my sister at the last moment, you know with whom you'll have to reckon like. [ROBERT *pays no heed to him.*

JOHN. [*To* JEREMY.] Can you do naught to work upon them a bit, Jerry?

JEREMY. I'd have a jug of cider in, master. 'Twill settle them all. Folks do get 'sterical and vapourish face to face with matrimony. Put some drink afore of them, and see how 'twill act.

LIZ. O what a wise thought, Master Jerry.

JANE. Most suitable, I call it.

[*Here* MARY MEADOWS *comes in,* JOHN *turns eagerly to her.*

JOHN. O Mary—have you come to help us in the fix where we are? [*He signs to* ROSE *and* ROBERT.

MARY. What has happened, John?

JEREMY. I'll tell you in a couple of words, mistress.

LIZ. No—do you fetch the cider, dear Mister Jeremy.

JOHN. 'Tis more than I can do with, Mary. Rose is set against Robert, and Robert is set against Rose. Rose—well I'm fairly ashamed to mention it—Rose has lost her senses and would wed the servant William—and Robert is a-courting of the maid.

JEREMY. Ah, let each fool follow their own liking, says I.

LIZ. And sister and me all dressed in our new gowns for the church.

JANE. And Jerry had to do the hooking for we, both of the servants having runned away.

MARY. Well, now I'm here I'll lend a hand. I'll help with the dinner time you're at church. You shall not need to trouble about anything, Mr. John.

JOHN. O once I do get them to the church and the ring fixed and all I shan't trouble about nothing, Mary. But 'tis how to move them from where they be! That's the puzzle.

ROSE. I'll never move till the hand that gathered these flowers be here to raise me.

ROBERT. I'll sit here to the end of the world sooner nor go along to be wed with Miss over there.

MARY. 'Tis midsummer heat have turned their brains. But I know a cooling draught that will heal them of their sickness. Jeremy, do you step into the garden and bring me a handful of fresh violet leaves, one blossom from the heartsease and a sprig of rosemary.

JEREMY. [*Sighing.*] What next?

JOHN. Get gone at once, Jerry.

[JEREMY *goes to the door—as he does so* LIZ *and* JANE *start up and follow him.*

LIZ. Sister and me will come along and help you, dear Mr. Jeremy.

JANE. And that us will, if our new gowns bain't hooked too tight for we to bend.

[*They follow* JEREMY *to the garden.* KITTY *silently leaves the room also.* ROSE *and* ROBERT *remain lost in their sorrowful reflections.* JOHN *and* MARY *look at them for a moment and then turn to one another.*

JOHN. Mary, I never thought to see such a thing as this.

MARY. You take my word for it, John, the storm will soon be blown away.

JOHN. I don't know how I should stand up against the worry of it all, wasn't it for you, Mary.

[*A short silence.*

JOHN. [*Taking* MARY'S *hand.*] 'Twill be a bit lonesome for me here, when they've gone off, Mary.

MARY. You'll have Kitty to do for you then.

JOHN. Kitty be going to live along of them at Bristol too, after a while.

MARY. [*Looking round the room.*] Then I count as it might feel a bit desolate like in this great house alone.

JOHN. [*Taking* MARY'S *hand.*] I cannot face it, Mary. I've loved you many years, you know.

MARY. I know you have, dear John.

JOHN. Can't you forget he what was false to you, days gone by, and take me as your husband now ?

MARY. [*Doubtfully.*] I don't hardly know.

JOHN. You used to sing sommat—the grass that was trampled under foot, give it time, it will rise up again.

MARY. [*Drying her eyes.*] Ah, it has risen, dear John—and I count it have covered the wound of those past days—my heart do tell me so, this minute.

JOHN. [*Holding both her hands.*] Then 'tis one long midsummer afore you and me, Mary.

MARY. That's how 'twill be, dear John.

[JEREMY, *followed by the cousins, enters. He holds a bunch of leaves towards* MARY.

JEREMY. There you be, mistress. Fools' drink for fools. A mug of good cider would have fetched them to their senses quicker.

[MARY *takes the bunch, and still holding* JOHN'S *hand, leads him to the kitchen.* JEREMY *watches the pair sarcastically.*

JEREMY. 'Tis all finished with the master, then.

[*The sisters seat themselves on the couch and mop their faces with handkerchiefs.*

LIZ. Dear me, 'tis warm.

JANE. I hope my face don't show mottled, sister ?

JEREMY. I was saying as how 'twas all finished with the master.

[MARY, *followed by* JOHN, *comes forward carrying two glasses. She gives one to* ROSE *and the other to* ROBERT.

MARY. Now do you take a good draught of this, the both of you. With violet leaves the fever of the mind is calmed, and heartsease lightens every trouble caused by love. Rosemary do put new life to anyone with its sweetness, and cold spring water does the rest.

[*She leaves the table and stands far back in the room by* JOHN'S *side.* ROSE *slowly lifts her glass and begins to drink.* ROBERT *does the same. They are watched with anxiety by all in the room. When they have emptied their glasses* ROSE *dries her tears and pushes the flowers a little way from her.* ROBERT *shakes himself and moves the cotton bonnet so that it falls unheeded to the floor. Meanwhile* KITTY *has come quietly to the garden door and stands there watching the scene intently.*

LIZ. Bain't we going to get a drink too ?

JANE. Seems as though master have been and forgot we.

JEREMY. [*Starting up and going to the kitchen.*] If I've been and forgot you two old women, I've remembered myself. Be blowed if I can get through any more of this foolishness without a wet of my mouth.

[*He goes out.*

ROSE. [*Speaking faintly.*] Does it show upon my face, the crying, Robert ?

ROBERT. [*Looking at her.*] No, no, Rose, your eyes be brighter nor ever they were.

ROSE. [*Pushing the forget-me-nots yet further away.*] Those flowers are dying. My fancy ones were best.

KITTY. [*Coming forward with the orange blossoms.*] Here they are, dear Rose.

ROSE. [*Taking them.*] O how beautiful they do look. I declare I can smell the sweetness coming out from them, Robert.

ROBERT. All the orange blossom in the world bain't so sweet as one kiss from your lips, Rose.

ROSE. Now is that truly so ?

ROBERT. Ah, 'tis heavy work a-waiting for the coach, Rose.

JOHN. [*Coming forward and taking* MARY'S *hand.*] And yours won't be the only marriage Rose-Anna. Did you never think that me and Mary might—

KITTY. [*Running forward.*] But I did—O so many times, John. [JEREMY *enters with* LUBIN *and* ISABEL.

JEREMY. Servants be comed back. Man was to the Red Bull, I count. Female a-washing and a-combing of herself in the barn.

ROSE. [*Coldly.*] I don't care whether they be here or not. Set them to work, Jerry, whilst we are to church.

LIZ. That's it, Master Jeremy. I was never so put out in my life, as when sister did keep on ringing and the wench was not there to help us on with our gowns.

[ROSE *and* ROBERT *get up and go towards the door. They pause before* LUBIN *and* ISABEL.

ROSE. The man puts me in mind of someone whom I knew before, called Lubin. I thought I had a fancy for him once—but 'twasn't really so.

ROBERT. And the girl do favour a little servant wench from Framilode.

ROSE. [*Jealously.*] You never went a-courting with a servant wench, now did you, my heart's dearest ?

ROBERT. Never in all my days, Rose. 'Twas but the fanciful thoughts of a boy towards she, that I had.

ROSE. [*Putting her arm in* ROBERT'S.] Well, we have nothing to do with anything more of it now, dear Robert.

ROBERT. You're about right, my true love, we'll get us off to the church.

JEREMY. Ah, coach have been waiting a smartish while, I reckon. 'Tis on master as expense'll fall.

[ROSE *and* ROBERT *with cold glances at* LUBIN *and* ISABEL, *pass out of the door.*

JOHN. [*Giving his arm to* MARY.] Now, Mary—now, Kitty. [*They pass out.*

LIZ. Now, Jeremy, sister and me bain't going off all alone.

JEREMY. [*Offering an arm to each.*] No further than the church door, I say. I've better things to do nor a-giving of my arm to females be they never so full of wiles. And you two do beat many what bain't near so long in the tusk, ah, that you does.

[JEREMY *goes out with the sisters.*

LUBIN. [*To* ISABEL.] And shall we go off into the meadows, Isabel, seeing that we are quite forgot?

ISABEL. No—'tis through these faithless ones as us have learnt to understand the hearts within of we. Let's bide and get the marriage dinner ready for them first.

[*She stretches both her hands towards* LUBIN, *who takes them reverently in his as the Curtain falls.*

THE NEW YEAR

CHARACTERS.

STEVE BROWNING, *a Blacksmith, also Parish Clerk.*
GEORGE DAVIS, *a Carpenter.*
HARRY MOSS, *a young Tramp.*
MAY BROWNING.
JANE BROWNING.
DORRY BROWNING, *aged twelve.*
ANNIE SIMS.
ROSE SIMS.
VASHTI REED.

THE NEW YEAR.

ACT I.—Scene 1.

A country roadside. It is late afternoon and already dusk. MAY BROWNING *with* HARRY MOSS *come slowly forward. Close to a stile which is a little off the road,* MAY *stops.*

MAY. There, you don't need to come no further with I, Harry Moss. You get on quick towards the town afore the night be upon you, and the snow, too.

HARRY. I don't care much about leaving you like this on the roadside, May. And that's the truth, 'tis.

MAY. Don't you take no more thought for I, Harry. 'Tis a good boy as you've been to I since the day when we fell in together. But now there bain't no more need for you to hold back your steps, going slow and heavy when you might run spry and light. For 'tis home as I be comed to now, I be. You go your way.

HARRY. I see naught of any house afore us or behind. 'Tis very likely dusk as is upon us, or may happen 'tis the fog getting up from the river.

MAY. [*Coughing.*] Look you across that stile, Harry. There be a field path, bain't there?

HARRY. [*Taking a few steps to the right and peering through the gloom.*] Ah, and that there be.

MAY. And at t'other end of it a house what's got a garden fence all round.

HARRY. Ah—and 'tis so. And now as I comes to look there be a light shining from out the windows of it, too, though 'tis shining dim-like in the mist.

MAY. 'Tis that yonder's my home, Harry. There's the door where I must stand and knock.

[*For a moment she draws the shawl over her face and is shaken with weeping.*

HARRY. I wouldn't take on so, if 'twas me.

MAY. And did you say as how there was a light in the window? 'Twill be but fire light then, for th'old woman she never would bring out the lamp afore 'twas night, close-handed old she-cat as her was, what'd lick up a drop of oil on to the tongue of her sooner nor it should go wasted.

HARRY. There, 'tis shining better now—or maybe as the fog have shifted.

MAY. 'Tis nigh to home as I be, Harry.

HARRY. Then get and stand up out of the wet grass there, and I'll go along of you a bit further. 'Twill not be much out of my way. Nothing to take no count of.

MAY. No, no, Harry. I bain't going to cross that field, nor yet stand at the door knocking till the dark has fallen on me. Why, is it like as I'd let them see me coming over the meadow and going through the gate in this? [*Holding up a ragged shawl.*] In these? [*Pointing to her broken shoes.*] And—as I be to-day.

[*Spreading out her arms and then suddenly bending forward in a fit of anguished coughing.*

HARRY. There, there, you be one as is too handy with the tongue, like. Don't you go for to waste the breath inside of you when you'll be wanting all your words for they as bides up yonder and as doesn't know that you be coming back.

MAY. [*Throwing apart her shawl and struggling with her cough.*] Harry, you take the tin and fill it at the ditch and give I to drink. 'Tis all live coals within I here, so 'tis.

HARRY. You get along home, and maybe as them'll find summat better nor water from the ditch to give you.

MAY. No, no, what was I a-saying to you? The

dark must fall and cover me, or I won't never go across the field nor a-nigh the house. Give I to drink, give I to drink. And then let me bide in quiet till all of the light be gone.

HARRY. [*Taking out a tin mug from the bundle beside her.*] Where be I to find drink, and the frost lying stiff upon the ground ?

MAY. [*Pointing.*] Up yonder, where the ash tree do stand. Look you there, 'tis a bit of spouting as do come through the hedge, and water from it, flowing downwards away to the ditch.

[HARRY *goes off with the can.* MAY *watches him, drawing her shawl again about her and striving to suppress a fit of coughing.*

[HARRY *returns and holds out the can.*

MAY. 'Tis not very quick as you've been, Harry Moss. Here—give it to I fast. Give !

[HARRY *puts the can towards her and she takes it in her hands, which shake feverishly, and she drinks with sharp avidity.*

MAY. 'Tis the taste as I have thought on these many a year. Ah, and have gotten into my mouth, too, when I did lay sleeping, that I have. Water from yonder spout, with the taste of dead leaves sharp in it. Drink of it, too, Harry.

HARRY. 'Tis no water as I wants, May. Give I summat as'll lie more warm and comfortable to th' inside like. I bain't one for much water, and that's the truth, 'tis. [*He empties the water on the ground.*

MAY. Then go you out upon your way, Harry Moss, for the dark be gathering on us fast, and there be many a mile afore you to the town, where the lamps do shine and 'tis bright and warm in the places where they sells the drink.

HARRY. Once I sets off running by myself, I'll get there fast enough, May. But I be going to stop along of you a bit more, for I don't care much about letting you bide lonesome on the road, like.

MAY. Then sit you down aside of me, Harry, and the

heat in my body, which is like flames, shall maybe warm yourn, too.

HARRY. [*Sitting down by her side.*] 'Tis a fine thing to have a home what you can get in and go to, May, with a bit of fire to heat the limbs of you at, and plenty of victuals as you can put inside. How was it as you ever came away from it, like ?

MAY. Ah, and that's what I be asking of myself most of the time, Harry ! For, 'tis summat like a twelve or eleven year since I shut the door behind me and went out.

[*A slight pause.*

MAY. Away from them all, upon the road—so 'twas.

HARRY. And never see'd no more of them, nor sent to say how 'twas with you, nor nothing ?

MAY. Nor nothing, Harry. Went out and shut the door behind me. And 'twas finished.

[*A long pause, during which the darkness has gathered.*

HARRY. Whatever worked on you for to do such a thing, May ?

MAY. [*Bitterly.*] Ah now, whatever did !

HARRY. 'Tweren't as though you might have been a young wench, flighty like, all for the town and for they as goes up and about the streets of it. For, look you here, 'tis an old woman as you be now, May, and has been a twenty year or more, I don't doubt.

MAY. An old woman be I, Harry ? Well, to the likes of you 'tis so, I count. But a twelve year gone by, O, 'twas a fine enough looking maid as I was then—Only a wild one, Harry, a wild one, all for the free ways of the road and the lights of the fair—And for the sun to rise in one place where I was, and for I to be in t'other when her should set.

HARRY. I'd keep my breath for when 'twas wanted, if 'twas me.

MAY. Come, look I in the face, Harry Moss, and tell I if so be as they'll be likely to know I again up at home ?

HARRY. How be I to tell you such a thing, May, seeing that 'tis but a ten days or less as I've been along

of you on the road ? And seeing that when you was a young wench I never knowed the looks of you neither ?

MAY. Say how the face of I do seem to you now, Harry, and then I'll tell you how 'twas in the days gone by ?

HARRY. 'Tis all too dark like for to see clear, May. The night be coming upon we wonderful fast.

MAY. The hair, 'twas bright upon my head eleven years gone by, Harry. 'Twas glancing, as might be the wing of a thrush, so 'twas.

HARRY. Well, 'tis as the frost might lie on a dead leaf now, May, that it be.

MAY. And the colour on me was as a rose, and my limbs was straight. 'Twas fleet like a rabbit as I could get about, the days that was then, Harry.

HARRY. 'Tis a poor old bent woman as you be now, May.

MAY. Ah, Death have been tapping on the door of my body this long while, but, please God, I can hold me with the best of them yet, Harry, and that I can. Victuals to th' inside of I and a bit of clothing to my bones, with summat to quiet this cough as doubles of I up. Why, there, Harry, you won't know as 'tis me when I've been to home a day or two—or may be as 'twill take a week.

HARRY. I count 'twill take a rare lot of victuals afore you be set up as you once was, May.

MAY. Look you in my eyes, Harry. They may not know me up at home by the hair, which is different to what 'twas, or by the form of me, which be got poor and nesh like. But in the eye there don't come never no change. So look you at they, Harry, and tell I how it do appear to you.

HARRY. There be darkness lying atween you and me, May.

MAY. Then come you close to I, Harry, and look well into they.

HARRY. Them be set open wonderful wide and 'tis as though a heat comed out from they. 'Tis not anyone

as might care much for to look into the eyes what you've got.

MAY. [*With despondence.*] Maybe then, as them'll not know as 'tis me, Harry Moss.

HARRY. I count as they'll be hard put to, and that's the truth.

MAY. The note of me be changed, too, with this cold what I have, and the breath of me so short, but 'twon't be long, I count, afore they sees who 'tis. Though all be changed to th' eye like, there'll be summat in me as'll tell they. And 'tis not a thing of shape, nor of colour as'll speak for I—But 'tis summat what do come straight out of the hearts of we and do say better words for we nor what the looks nor tongues of us might tell. You mind me, Harry, there's that which will come out of me as'll bring they to know who 'tis.

HARRY. Ah, I reckon as you'll not let them bide till they does.

MAY. And when they do know, and when they sees who 'tis, I count as they'll be good to me, I count they will. I did used to think as Steve, he was a hard one, and th' old woman what's his mother, hard too—And that it did please him for to keep a rein on me like, but I sees thing different now.

HARRY. Ah, 'tis one thing to see by candle and another by day.

MAY. For 'twas wild as I was in the time gone by. Wild after pleasuring and the noise in the town, and men a-looking at the countenance of I, and a-turning back for to look again. But, hark you here, 'tis powerful changed as I be now.

HARRY. Ah, I count as you be. Be changed from a young woman into an old one.

MAY. I'm finished with the road journeying and standing about in the streets on market days and the talk with men in the drinking places—Men what don't want to look more nor once on I now, and what used to follow if 'twasn't only a bit of eyelid as I'd lift on them, times that is gone.

HARRY. Ah, 'twould take a lot of looking to see you as you was.

MAY. Yes, I be finished with all of it now, and willing for to bide quiet at the fireside and to stay with the four walls round I and the door shut.

HARRY. I reckon as you be.

MAY. And I'm thinking as they'll be rare pleased for to have I in the house again. 'Twill be another pair of hands to the work like. And when I was young, 'twas not on work as I was set much.

HARRY. Ah, I did guess as much.

MAY. But when I gets a bit over this here nasty cough, 'tis a strong arm as them'll have working for they; Steve, th' old woman what's his mother, and little Dorry, too.

HARRY. Dorry? I han't heard tell of she.

MAY. That's my little baby as was, Harry Moss. I left she crawling on the floor, and now I count as she be growed into a rare big girl. Bless the innocent heart of her!

HARRY. Whatever led you to do such a thing, I can't think! You must have been drove to it like, wasn't you?

MAY. 'Twas summat inside of me as drove I, then. 'Twas very likely the blood of they gipsies which did leap in I, so that when I was tied up to Steve, 'twas as if they had got I shut in a box. 'Twas the bridle on my head and the bit in the mouth of I; and to be held in where once I had gone free. [*A short pause.*

MAY. And I turned wild, Harry, for the very birds seemed to be calling I from the hedges to come out along of they, and the berries tossing in the wind, and the leaves blowing away quick from where they'd been stuck all summer. All of it spoke to I, and stirred I powerful, so that one morning when the sun was up and the breeze running, I comed out into the air, Harry, and shut the door behind I. And 'twas done—so 'twas.

HARRY. And didn't they never try for to stop you, nor for to bring you back, May?

MAY. No, Harry, they did not.

HARRY. And where was it you did go to, May, once you was out and the door shut ahind of you ?

MAY. Ah—where ! To the east, to the south, every part. 'Twas morning with I in that time, and the heart of I was warm. And them as went along of I on the road, did cast but one look into the countenance of I. Then 'twas the best as they could give as I might take ; and 'twas for no lodging as I did want when dark did come falling.

HARRY. And yet, look you here, you be brought down terrible low, May.

MAY. The fine looks of a woman be as grass, Harry, and in the heat of the day they do wither and die. And that what has once been a grand flower in the hand of a man is dropped upon the ground and spat upon, maybe. So 'twas with I.

[*She bows her head on her knees, and for a moment is shaken with sudden grief.*

HARRY. Don't you take on so, May. Look you here, you be comed to the end of your journeying this day, and that you be.

MAY. [*Raising her head.*] Ah, 'tis so, 'tis so. And 'tis rare glad as them'll be to see I once again. Steve, he's a hard man, but a good one—And I'll tell you this, Harry Moss, he'll never take up with no woman what's not me—and that he won't—I never knowed him much as look on one, times past ; and 'twill be the same as ever now, I reckon. And little Dorry, 'twill be fine for her to get her mammy back, I warrant—so 'twill.

[*A slight pause.*

MAY. Th' old woman—well—I shan't take it amiss if her should be dead, like. Her was always a smartish old vixen to I, that her was, and her did rub it in powerful hard as Steve was above I in his station and that. God rest the bones of she, for I count her'll have been lying in the churchyard a good few years by now. But I bain't one to bear malice, and if so be as her's above ground, 'tis a rare poor old wretch with

no poison to the tongue of she, as her'll be this day—so 'tis.

HARRY. Look you here—the snow's begun to fall and 'tis night. Get up and go in to them all yonder. 'Tis thick dark now and there be no one on the road to see you as you do go.

MAY. Help I to get off the ground then, Harry, for the limbs of me be powerful weak.

HARRY. [*Lifting her up.*] The feel of your body be as burning wood, May.

MAY. [*Standing up.*] Put me against the stile, Harry, and then let I bide alone.

HARRY. Do you let me go over the field along of you, May, just to the door.

MAY. No, no, Harry, get you off to the town and leave me to bide here a while in the quiet of my thoughts. 'Tis of little Dorry, and of how pleased her'll be to see her mammy once again, as I be thinking. But you, Harry Moss, as han't got no home to go to, nor fireside, nor victuals, you set off towards the town. And go you quick.

HARRY. There's summat in me what doesn't care about leaving you so, May.

MAY. And if ever you should pass this way come spring-time, Harry, when the bloom is white on the trees, and the lambs in the meadows, come you up to the house yonder, and may be as I'll be able to give you summat to keep in remembrance of me. For to-day, 'tis empty-handed as I be.

HARRY. I don't want nothing from you, May, I don't.

MAY. [*Fumbling in her shawl.*] There, Harry—'tis comed back to my mind now. [*She takes out part of a loaf of bread.*] Take you this bread. And to-night, when you eats of it, think on me, and as how I be to home with Steve a-holding of my hand and little Dorry close against me; and plenty of good victuals, with a bed to lie upon warm. There, Harry, take and eat.

[*She holds the bread to him*

HARRY. [*Taking the bread.*] I count 'twill all be well with you now, May ?

MAY. I warrant as 'twill, for I be right to home. But go you towards the town, Harry, for 'tis late. And God go with you, my dear, now and all time.

HARRY. I'll set off running then. For the night, 'tis upon us, May, and the snow, 'tis thick in the air.

[MAY *turns to the stile and leans on it heavily, gazing across the field.* HARRY *sets off quickly down the road.*

ACT II.—Scene 1.

The living room in the Brownings' cottage. The room is divided by a curtain which screens the fireside end from the draught of the principal door.

To the right of the fireplace is a door leading upstairs. Chairs are grouped round the hearth, and there is a table at which JANE BROWNING *is ironing a dress by the light of one candle.* DORRY *leans against the table, watching her.*

JANE. [*Putting aside the iron.*] There, you take and lay it on the bed upstairs, and mind you does it careful, for I'm not a-going to iron it twice.

[*She lays the dress carefully across* DORRY'S *arms.*

DORRY. Don't the lace look nice, Gran'ma ?

JANE. You get along upstairs and do as I says, and then come straight down again.

DORRY. Couldn't I put it on once, Gran'ma, just to see how it do look on me ?

JANE. And get it all creased up afore to-morrow ! Whatever next ! You go and lay it on the bed this minute, do you hear ?

DORRY. [*Leaving the room by the door to the right.*] I'd like to put it on just once, I would.

[JANE BROWNING *blows out the candle and puts away the iron and ironing cloth. She stirs up the fire and then sits down by it as* DORRY *comes back.*

DORRY. Dad's cleaning of himself ever so—I heard the water splashing something dreadful as I went by his door.

JANE. 'Tis a-smartening of hisself up for this here dancing as he be about, I reckon.

DORRY. [*Sitting down on a stool.*] I'd like to go along, too, and see the dancing up at the schools to-night, I would.

JANE. And what next, I should like to know!

DORRY. And wear my new frock what's ironed, and the beads what Miss Sims gived me.

JANE. [*Looking out at the window.*] I'm thinking as we shall get some snow by and bye. 'Tis come over so dark all of a sudden.

DORRY. Couldn't I go along of they, Gran'ma, and wear my new frock, and the beads, too? I never see'd them dance th' old year out yet, I haven't.

JANE. Get along with you, Dorry. 'Tis many a year afore you'll be of an age for such foolishness. And that's what I calls it, this messing about with dancing and music and I don't know what.

DORRY. Katie Sims be younger nor me and she's let to go, she is.

JANE. You bain't Katie Sims, nor she you. And if the wedding what's to-morrow isn't enough to stuff you up with nonsense, I don't know what is.

DORRY. I wish it was to-morrow now, Gran'ma, I do. Shall you put on your Sunday gown first thing, or wait till just afore we goes to church?

JANE. How your tongue do go! Take and bide quiet a bit, if you knows how.

DORRY. I shall ask Dad if I may go along of him and Miss Sims to the dance, I shall. Dad's got that kind to

me since last night—he gived me a sixpence to buy sweets this morning when I hadn't asked. And won't it be nice when Miss Sims comes here to live, and when you has someone to help you in the work, Gran'ma ?

JANE. Well—'tis to be hoped as 'twill be all right this time.

DORRY. This time, Gran'ma ! Why, wasn't it all right when Dad was married afore, then ?

JANE. [*Getting the lamp from a shelf.*] I don't light up as a rule till 'tis six o'clock, but I count it's a bit of snow coming as have darkened the air like.

DORRY. Gran'ma, isn't Miss Sims nice-looking, don't you think ? I'd like to wear my hair like hers and have earrings a-hanging from me and a-shaking when I moves my head, I would.

JANE. [*Setting the lamp on the table.*] Here, fetch me the matches, do.

DORRY. [*Bringing the matches.*] Was my mammy nice-looking, like Miss Sims, Gran'ma ?

JANE. I'm one as goes by other things nor looks—For like as not 'tis fine looks as is the undoing of most girls as has them—give me a plain face and a heart what's pure, I says, and tis not far out as you'll be.

DORRY. Was my mammy's heart pure, Gran'ma ?

[*A moment's silence.* JANE *lights the lamp.*
DORRY *leans at the table, watching her.*

DORRY. Was my mammy's—

[*A loud knock on the outside door.*

JANE. Who's that come bothering round ! Run and see, Dorry, there's a good child.

DORRY. It'll be Gran'ma Vashti, I daresay. She do mostly knock at the door loud with her stick.

[DORRY *runs to the window and looks out.*

DORRY. 'Tis her, and the snow white all upon her.

[DORRY *goes to the door to open it.*

JANE. [*To herself.*] Of all the meddlesome old women—why can't her bide till her's wanted.

[DORRY *opens the door wide, and* VASHTI *comes slowly in to the room, leaning on a big staff.*

JANE. Well, Vashti Reed, and what brings you down from the hill to-day? 'Twould have been better had you bid at home, with the dark coming on and the snow.

DORRY. [*Who has closed the door.*] Sit down, Granny—there, close against the fire, do.

[VASHTI *stands in the middle of the room, looking from one to another.*

DORRY. Sit down, Granny, by the fire, do.

VASHTI. 'Tis in the house and out of it as I have went. And down to the pool where the ice do lie, and up on the fields where 'tis fog, And there be summat in I what drives I onward, as might the wind. And no where may the bones of me rest this day.

JANE. If 'tis to talk your foolishness as you be come, you'd best have stopped away. Here, sit you down, Vashti Reed, and behave sensible, and maybe as I'll get you summat warm to drink presently.

DORRY. Yes, Grannie, sit you down along of we.

[VASHTI *sits stiffly down by the hearth, leaning on her stick.* JANE *resumes her place, and* DORRY *puts her little stool between them.*

VASHTI. And in the night when I was laid down, against the windowpane it fled a three times. A three time it fled and did beat the pane as though 'twould get in. And I up and did open the window. And the air it ran past I, and 'twas black, with naught upon it but the smell of a shroud. So I knowed.

DORRY. What did you know, Granny?

VASHTI. [*Leaning forward and warming her hands at the fire, speaking as though to herself.*] Summat lost—summat lost, and what was trying to get safe away.

DORRY. Safe away? From what, Granny?

VASHTI. And there be one what walks abroad in the night time, what holds in the hand of him a stick, greater nor this staff what I holds here, and the knife to it be as long again by twice.

DORRY. O, Granny, I'll be a-feared to go across the garden after dark, I shall.

JANE. What do you want to go and put that there

into the child's head for ? I'd like for Steve to hear you talking of such stuff.

VASHTI. I sat me down at the table, but the victuals was as sand in the mouth, and the drink did put but coldness within I. And when the door was closed, 'twas as if one did come running round the house and did beat upon it for to be let in. Then I did go for to open it, but the place outside was full of emptiness, and 'twas they old carrion crows what did talk to I out of the storm.

JANE. How you do go on, to be sure ! Why don't you speak of summat what's got some sense to it ? Come, don't you know as Steve, his wedding day, 'tis to-morrow as ever is,

DORRY. 'Tis the New Year, too, Granny, as well as Dad's marriage.

VASHTI. [*Suddenly.*] Be this house made ready for a-marrying, then ?

DORRY. Why, of course it be, Granny. Don't you see how 'tis cleaned and the new net curtains in the windows, and the bit of drugget 'gainst the door where the old one always tripped me up ?

VASHTI. I see naught but what 'tis more like a burial here. So 'tis. And 'tis a burial as I've carried in my heart as I comed down from the hills.

DORRY. [*Looking out of the window.*] Granny, you'll be forced to bide the night along of we, 'cause the snow be falling thick, and 'twill be likely as not as you'll lose your way if you start for to go home again when 'tis snowing.

JANE. Th' old thing may as well bide the night now she be come. Hark you, Vashti, 'twill save you the journey down to-morrow like, if you bides the night, and the chimney corner is all as you ever wants.

VASHTI. And what should I be journeying down to-morrow for, Jane Browning ?

DORRY. Why, Granny, 'tis Dad's wedding day to-morrow, and 'tis a white frock with lace to it as I'm going to wear, and beads what Miss Sims gived me, and

the shoes what was new except for being worn to church three times. Shall I fetch them all and show to you, Granny ?

JANE. Yes, run along and get them, Dorry ; very likely 'twill give her thoughts a turn, looking at the things, seeing as she be in one of her nasty moods to-day when you can't get a word what isn't foolishness out of her. [DORRY *runs upstairs.*

VASHTI. [*Leaning forward.*] Was her telling of a marriage ?

JANE. Why, yes, Vashti Reed. And you know all about it, only you don't trouble for to recollect nothing but what you dreams of yourself in the night. 'Tis our Steve what's going to marry Annie Sims to-morrow.

VASHTI. Steve Browning ?

JANE. I haven't patience with th' old gipsy ! Yes—Steve. And 'tis a twelvemonth or more as you'd knowed of it.

VASHTI. Our Steve, what's husband to my May ?

JANE. 'Tis a fine thing to fetch up May this evening, that 'tis. May, what went out trolloping along the roads 'stead of she biding at home to mind the house and child ! 'Tis how you did breed she up, Vashti Reed, what led her to act as her did. And if you'd have bred her different, 'twould have been all the same ; for what's in the blood is bound to out and show ; and when you picks a weed and sets it in the room, 'tain't no flower as you must look for.

VASHTI. 'Tis summat like a twelve year since her went. But in the blinking of an eye the latch might be raised, and she come through the door again. God bless the head an feet of she !

JANE. There you are, Vashti, talking so foolish. A bad herb like she, was bound for to meet her doom. And 'twas in the river up London way where the body of her was catched, floating, and the same petticoat to it as I've seed on May a score of times. Don't you recollect how 'twas parson as brought the news to we ?

VASHTI. 'Taint with no parsons as I do hold, nor with what may come from the mouths of they, neither.

JANE. And Steve, I knowed what was in his mind when parson was gone out. 'Twas not much as he did say, being a man what hasn't many words to his tongue. But he took and fetched down his big coat what do hang up yonder, and told I to put a bit of black to the sleeve of it. Leastways, he didn't speak the words, but I seed what he was after, and I took and sewed a bit on, and he's wore it ever since till yesterday—And that's eleven year ago it be—so there.

VASHTI. Her be moving about upon the earth, her be. And I seems to feel the tread of she at night time, and by day as well. Her bain't shrouded, nor boxed, nor no churchyard sod above the limbs of she—you take my words—and there shall come a day when the latch shall rise and her be standing among us and a-calling on her child and husband what's forgotten she.

JANE. For goodness sake, Vashti, have done speaking about such things to-night. If Steve was to hear you, why I shouldn't wonder if he was to put you out of the door and into the snow—and 'tis most unfitting for to talk so afore the child.

VASHTI. [*Calling out loudly.*] Come back to I, May —you come back to I—there bain't no one what thinks on the name of you, or what wants you but your old mother. You come back to I!

JANE. I'll thank you for to shut your mouth, old Vashti! 'Tain't nothing to be proud on as you've got, and 'twould be better if you was to be less free in your hollering. Look, here's Dorry coming.

[DORRY *comes into the kitchen; she is wearing her new white frock.*

DORRY. See, Granny, I've been and put it on for to show you better. See the lace? Isn't it nice? And the beads, too. I didn't stop for to put on my shoes, nor my new stockings. Nor my hat, what's got a great long feather all round of it.

JANE. You bad, naughty girl, Dorry, you'll crease

and tumble that frock so as it's not fit to be seen to-morrow! Whatever did you go to put it on for?

DORRY. So as that Gran should see something pretty, and so as she should come out of her trouble. Gran's always got some trouble in her mind, han't you, Granny?

VASHTI. A twelve year gone by, my child.

JANE. I'll give it you if you starts off again.

VASHTI. A twelve year gone by—

DORRY. A twelve year gone by, what then, Granny?

VASHTI. 'Tis more'n eleven years since her wented out of the door, my child—your poor mammy. Out of the door, out of the door! And likely as not 'twill be feet first as her shall be brought in again.

DORRY. Granny, was my poor mammy, what's dead nice looking like Miss Sims as is going for to marry Dad, to-morrow?

VASHTI. 'Twas grand as a tree in full leaf and the wind a-moving all the green of it as was your mammy, my dear.

DORRY. And did she have fine things to her, nice gowns and things, like Miss Sims, Granny?

JANE. 'Twas the looks of her and the love of finery and pleasuring what was her undoing, as 'twill be the undoing of you, too, Dorry, if you don't take care. 'Tis she as you favours, and none of your father's people, more's the pity, and 'tis more thoughtful and serious as you'll have to grow if you don't want to come to harm. You take and go right up, and off with that frock, do you hear me?

DORRY. O, I wanted to be let to go to the dancing now I'd got it on, I did.

JANE. Dancing, there you are! Dancing and finery, 'tis all as you do think on, and 'tis plain to see what's got working in the inside of you, Dorry. 'Tis the drop of bad blood as you has got from she what bore you. But I might as well speak to that door for all you cares. Only, hark you here, you'll be sorry one of these days

as you han't minded me better. And then 'twill be too late.

[STEVE *comes down the stairs, pushes open the door and enters.*

STEVE. Well, Mother, what's up now? Gran, you here? Why, Dorry, what be you a-crying for?

DORRY. I wants to be let to go to the dancing, Dad —now that I've got my frock on and all.—O, I wants to be let to go.

STEVE. Well, Mother—what do you say? 'Twouldn't hurt for she to look in about half an hour, and Annie and me we could bring her back betimes.

DORRY. O, Dad, I wants to go if 'twas only for a minute.

STEVE. There, there—you shall go and we'll say no more about it.

JANE. I never knowed you give in to her so foolish like this afore, Steve.

STEVE. Well, Mother, 'tain't every day as a man's married, that 'tain't.

VASHTI. And so you're to be wed come to-morrow, Steve? They tells me as you're to be wed.

STEVE. That's right enough, Gran.

VASHTI. [*Rising.*] And there be no resting in me to-day, Steve. There be summat as burns quick in the bones of my body and that will not let me bide.—And 'tis steps as I hears on the roadside and in the fields—and 'tis a bad taste as is in my victuals, and I must be moving, and peering about, and a-taking cold water into my mouth for to do away with the thing on my tongue, which is as the smell of death—So 'tis.

JANE. Now she's off again! Come, sit you down, Vashti Reed, and I'll give you summat as'll very likely warm you and keep you quiet in your chair a while. Just you wait till I gets the water boiling.

[*She begins to stir up the fire and sets a kettle on it.*

DORRY. [*From the window.*] Here's Miss Sims coming up the path, and Rosie too. O, they're wrapped

up all over 'cause 'tis snowing. I'll open, I'll open.

[*She runs to the door and unlatches it.* ANNIE *and* ROSE SIMS *come in, shaking the snow from them and unbuttoning their cloaks, which* STEVE *takes from them and hangs on the door.*

ACT II.—Scene 2.

ANNIE. [*As* STEVE *takes off her cloak.*] 'Tis going to be a dreadful night. The snow's coming down something cruel.

ROSE. There won't be many to the dance if it keeps on like this, will there ?

STEVE. Get you to the fire, both of you, and warm yourselves before we sets out again.

DORRY. Miss Sims, Miss Sims—Miss Rosie—I'm going along with you to the dance, Dad says as I may.

JANE. Bless the child ! However her has worked upon her father, and he so strict, I don't know.

ANNIE. Well, you be got up fine and grand, Dorry—I shouldn't hardly know 'twas you. [*Turning to* VASHTI REED.] Good evening, Mrs. Reed, my eyes was very near blinded when I first got in out of the dark, and I didn't see as you was there.

ROSE. Good evening, Mrs. Reed, and how be you keeping this cold weather ?

VASHTI. [*Peering into their faces as they stand near her.*] What be you a-telling I of ?

ANNIE. We was saying, how be you in this sharp weather, Mrs. Reed ?

VASHTI. How be I ?

ROSE. Yes, Mrs. Reed, how be you a-keeping now 'tis come over such nasty weather ?

VASHTI. And how should an old woman be, and her one child out in the rain and all the wind, and driv' there too by them as was laid like snakes in the grass about the feet of she, ready for to overthrow she when her should have gotten to a time of weakness.

JANE. Take no account of what she do say, girls, but sit you down in the warm and bide till I gets the time to take and look on the clothes which you have upon you. [*Moving about and putting tea things on the table.*] I be but just a-going to make a cup of tea for th' old woman, with a drop of summat strong to it as will keep her from using of her tongue so free till morning time.

ANNIE. [*Sitting down.*] Poor old woman, 'tis a sad thing when folks do come to such a pass as she.

ROSE. And han't got their proper sense to them, nor nothing. But she's better off nor a poor creature what we saw crouching below the hedge as we was coming across the meadow. "Why," I says to Annie, "it must be bad to have no home to bide in such a night as this!" Isn't that so, Mrs. Browning?

STEVE. Ah, you're right there, you're right.

ROSE. I wouldn't much care to be upon the road to-night, would you, Steve?

VASHTI. And at that hour when th' old year be passing out, and dark on all the land, the graves shall open and give up the dead which be in they. And, standing in the churchyard you may read the face to each, as the corpses do go by. There's many a night as I have stood and have looked into they when them did draw near to I, but never the face I did seek.

[*Here* JANE, *who has been making a cup of tea, and who has poured something in it from a bottle, advances to* VASHTI.

JANE. Here, Vashti Reed, here's a nice cup of hot tea for you. Take and drink it up and very likely 'twill warm th' inside of you, for I'll lay as you haven't seen a mouthful of naught this day.

STEVE. Ah, that's it, that's it. When folks do go

leer 'tis a powerful lot of fancies as do get from the stomach to the heads of they.

[VASHTI *takes the cup and slowly drinks.*

DORRY. O, Miss Sims, you do look nice. Look, Gran'ma, at what Miss Sims have got on!

VASHTI. [*Putting down her cup and leaning forward.*] Which of you be clothed for marriage?

JANE. Get along of you, Gran, 'tis for the dance up at the school as they be come.

VASHTI. Come you here—her what's to wed our Steve. Come you here and let I look at you. My eyes bain't so quick as they was once. Many tears have clouded they. But come you here.

DORRY. Go along to her, Miss Sims, Granny wants to look at your nice things.

ANNIE. [*Steps in front of* VASHTI.] Here I be, Mrs. Reed.

VASHTI. Be you the one what's going to wed our Steve come New Year.

ANNIE. That's it, Mrs. Reed, that's it.

VASHTI. And be these garments which you be clothed in for marriage or for burial?

STEVE. Come, Granny, have another cup of tea. Annie, don't you take no account of she. 'Tis worry and that as have caused the mind of she to wander a bit, but she don't mean nothing by it.

ANNIE. All right, Steve. She don't trouble me at all. [*To* VASHTI.] 'Tis to be hoped as I shall make a good wife to Steve, Mrs. Reed.

VASHTI. Steve! What do Steve want with another wife? Han't he got one already which is as a rose among the sow-thistles. What do Steve want for with a new one then?

STEVE. Come on, girls. I can't stand no more of this. Let's off, and call in to George's as we do go by.

ROSE. We did meet Mr. Davis as we was coming along and he said as how 'twouldn't be many minutes afore he joined us here, Steve.

STEVE. That's right, then we'll bide a bit longer till

George do call for we, only 'tis more nor I can stand when th' old lady gets her tongue moving.

DORRY. Why, look, Gran's fell asleep! O, Miss Sims, now that Gran's dropped off and can't say none of her foolish things any more, do stand so as Dad and Gran'ma can see the frock which you've got for the dance.

ANNIE. O, Dorry, you're a little torment, that's the truth.

[*She gets up and turns slowly round so that all can see what she has on.*

ROSE. Well, Steve?

STEVE. Well, Rosie.

ROSE. Haven't you got nothing as you can say, Steve?

STEVE. What be I to say, Rose?

ROSE. Well, something of how you thinks she looks, of course.

STEVE. O, 'tis all right, I suppose.

ROSE. All right! And is that about all as you've seen? Why, bless you, Steve, where have you gone and hid your tongue I should like to know!

STEVE. Well, there bain't nothing wrong, be there?

ROSE. Of course there isn't. But I never did see such a man as you, Steve. Why, I don't believe as you'd know whether Annie haves a pair of eyes to her face or not, nor if they be the same colour one to t'other.

STEVE. I sees enough for me. I sees as Annie is the girl as I've picked out of the whole world. And I know that to-morrow she and I is to be made man and wife. And that be pretty nigh enough for me this night, I reckon.

DORRY. O, Miss Sims, do you hear what Dad is saying? O, I wonder what I should feel if 'twas me that was going to be married!

ROSE. You get and ask Annie how 'tis with her, Dorry. I could tell a fine tale of how as she do lie tossing half the nights, and of the candles that's burned right down to the very end of them, I could.

ANNIE. Don't you go for to listen to her, Dorry, nor

Steve, neither. She's that flustered herself about the dance to-night that she scarce do know what she's a-saying of. But suppose you was just to ask her what she's got wrapped so careful in that there paper in her hand.

DORRY. O, Rosie, whatever is it ?

STEVE. What's that you've got hold on now, Rosie ?

ANNIE. Come, show them all, Rose.

[ROSE *slowly unfolds the paper and shows them all a hothouse carnation and a fern.*

ROSE. There 'tis, then.

DORRY. O my, Rosie—isn't it beautiful. Be you going to wear it to the dance ?

ROSE. No, Dorry, 'tisn't for me.

ANNIE. You just ask her for whom it is, then, Dorry.

DORRY. O, who is it for, Rosie—who is it for ?

ROSE. No—I'm not a-going to tell none of you.

[*She wraps it up carefully again.*

ANNIE. I'll tell then, for you.

ROSE. No, you shan't, Annie—that you shan't !

ANNIE. That I shall, then—come you here, Dorry—I'll whisper it to your ear. [*Whispers it to* DORRY.

DORRY. [*Excitedly.*] I know who 'tis—I know—'tis for Mr. Davis—for Mr. Davis ! Think of that, Dad—the flower 'tis for George Davis.

ROSIE. O, Annie, how you could !

STEVE. George——

VASHTI. [*Suddenly roused.*] Who named George ? There was but one man as was called by that name—and he courted my girl till her was faint and weary of the sound and shape of he, and so on a day when he was come——

DORRY. There's Gran gone off on her tales again.

[JANE *crosses the hearth and puts a shawl over the head of* VASHTI, *who relapses again into sleep.*

STEVE. [*Sitting down by* ROSIE.] What's this, Rose ? I han't heard tell of this afore. Be there aught a-going on with you and George, then ?

ROSE. No, Steve, there isn't nothing in it much, except that George and me we walked out last Sunday in the evening like—and a two or three time before.

STEVE. And is it that you be a-keeping of that flower for to give to George, then ?

ROSE. Well—'tis for George as I've saved it out of some what the gardener up at Squire's gived me.

STEVE. [*As though to himself.*] 'Tis a powerful many years since George he went a-courting. I never knowed him so much as look upon a maid, I didn't since——

ROSE. Well, Steve, I'm sure there's no need for you to be upset over it. 'Tis nothing to you who George walks out with, or who he doesn't.

STEVE. Who said as I was upset, Rose ?

ROSE. Look at the long face what you've pulled. Annie, if 'twas me, I shouldn't much care about marrying a man with such a look to him.

ANNIE. What's up, Steve ? What's come over you like, all of a minute ?

STEVE. 'Tis naught, Annie, naught. 'Twas summat of past times what comed into the thoughts of me. But 'tis naught. And, Rose, if so be as 'twas you as George is after, I'd wish him to have luck, with all my heart, I would, for George and me—well, we too has always stuck close one to t'other, as you knows.

JANE. Ah—that you has, George and you—you and George.

ANNIE. Hark—there's someone coming up now.

DORRY. O, let me open the door—let me open it !

[*She runs across the room and lifts the latch.* GEORGE *stands in the doorway shaking the snow from him. Then he comes into the room.*

DORRY. I'm going to the dance, Mr. Davis. Look, haven't I got a nice frock on ?

STEVE. Good evening, George, and how be you to-night ?

GEORGE. Nicely, Steve, nicely. Good evening, Mrs. Browning. Miss Sims, good evening—Yes, Steve, I'll

off with my coat, for 'tis pretty well sprinkled with snow, like.

[STEVE *helps* GEORGE *to take off his overcoat.*

ROSE. A happy New Year to you, Mr. Davis.

JANE. And that's a thing which han't no luck to it, if 'tis said afore the proper time, Rosie.

ROSE. Well, but 'tis New Year's Eve, isn't it ?

GEORGE. Ah, so 'tis—and a terrible nasty storm as ever I knowed ! 'Twas comed up very nigh to my knees, the snow, as I was a-crossing of the meadow. And there lay some poor thing sheltering below the hedge, with a bit of sacking throwed over her. I count 'tis very near buried alive as anyone would be as slept out in such a night.

STEVE. I reckon 'twould be so—so 'twould. But come you in and give yourself a warm ; and Mother, what do you say to getting us a glass of cider all round afore we sets out to the dancing.

JANE. What do you want to be taking drinks here for, when 'tis free as you'll get them up at the school ?

STEVE Just a drop for to warm we through. Here, I'll fetch it right away.

JANE. No, you don't. I'll have no one meddling in the pantry save it's myself. Dorry, give me that there jug.

DORRY. [*Taking a jug from the dresser.*] Here 'tis, Gran'ma, shall I light the candle ?

JANE. So long as you'll hold the matches careful.

ANNIE. Well—'tis to be hoped as the weather'll change afore morning.

ROSE. We shall want a bit of sunshine for the bride.

GEORGE. That us shall, but it don't look much as though we should get it.

[JANE BROWNING *and* DORRY *go out of the room.*

STEVE. Sit you down, George, along of we. 'Tis right pleased as I be for to see you here to-night.

GEORGE. Well, Steve, I bain't one for a lot of words but I be powerful glad to see you look as you does, and

'tis all joy as I wishes you and her what's to be your wife, to-morrow.

ANNIE. Thank you kindly, Mr. Davis. I shall do my best for Steve, and a girl can't do no more, can she ?

ROSE. And so you're going to church along of Steve, Mr. Davis ?

GEORGE. 'Tis as Steve do wish, but I be summat after a cow what has broke into the flower gardens, places where there be many folk got together and I among they.

ROSE. O, come, Mr. Davis !

GEORGE. 'Tis with me as though t'were all hoof and horn as I was made of. But Steve, he be more used to mixing up with the quality folks and such things, and he do know better nor I how to carry his self in parts when the ground be thick on them.

ANNIE. Very likely 'tis a-shewing of them into their places of a Sunday and a-ringing of the bell and a-helping of the vicar along with the service, like, as has made Steve so easy.

ROSIE. But, bless you, Mr. Davis, you sees a good bit of the gentry, too, in your way, when you goes in to houses, as it might be the Squire's for to put up a shelf, or mend a window, and I don't know what.

GEORGE. Ah, them caddling sort of jobs don't much agree with I, Miss Rose. And when I gets inside one of they great houses, where the maids do pad about in boots what you can't hear, and do speak as though 'twere church and parson at his sermon, I can't think of naught but how 'twill feel for to be out in the open again. Why, bless you, I do scarce fetch my breath in one of they places from fear as there should be too much sound to it, and the noise of my own hammer do very near scare I into fits.

ROSE. Well, Mr. Davis, who would ever have thought it ?

[MRS. BROWNING *and* DORRY *come back and the cider is put upon the table,* DORRY *and* ANNIE *getting glasses from the dresser.*

GEORGE. [*Drinking.*] Your health, Steve, and yours, too, Miss Sims. And many years of happiness to you both.

STEVE. Thank you kindly, George.

ANNIE. Thank you, Mr. Davis.

DORRY. Hasn't Miss Sims got a nice frock on her for the dance, Mr. Davis ?

GEORGE. Well, I'm blessed if I'd taken no notice of it, Dorry.

DORRY. Why, you're worse nor Dad, I do declare ! But you just look at Rosie, now, Mr. Davis, and ask her what she's got wrapped up in that there paper in her hand.

ROSE. O, Dorry, you little tease, you !

DORRY. You just ask her, Mr. Davis.

ROSE. [*Undoing the parcel.*] There, 'tis nothing to make such a commotion of ! Just a flower—see, Mr. Davis ? I knowed as it was one what you was partial to, and so I just brought it along with me.

GEORGE. That there bain't for I, be it ?

ROSE. Indeed 'tis—if so as you'll accept of it.

GEORGE. O, 'tis best saved against to-morrow. The freshness will be most gone from it, if I was to wear it now.

DORRY. No, no, Mr. Davis, 'tis for now ! To wear at the dance. Put it on him, Rosie, put it on him.

ROSE. [*Tossing the flower across the table to* GEORGE.] He can put it on hisself well enough, Dorry.

GEORGE. [*After a moment's hesitation.*] I don't know so well about that.

ANNIE. Go on, Rosie—pin it into his coat. Come, 'tis getting late.

DORRY. O, pin it in quick, Rosie—come along—and then we can start to the dancing.

ROSE. Shall I, Mr. Davis ?

[GEORGE *gets up and crosses the room* ; ROSE *takes the flower and* DORRY *hands her a pin. She slowly pins the flower in his coat.*

STEVE. [*Stretching out his hand to* ANNIE.] You be so quiet like to-night, Annie. There isn't nothing wrong, is there, my dear ?

ANNIE. 'Tis only I'm that full of gladness, Steve, as I don't seem to find words to my tongue for the things what I can talk on most days.

STEVE. And that's how 'tis with I, too, Annie. 'Tis as though I was out in the meadows, like—And as though 'twere Sunday, and such a stillness all around that I might think 'twas only me as was upon the earth. But then summat stirs in me sudden and I knows that you be there, too, and 'tis my love for you what has put me right away from the rest of them.

ANNIE. Steve, you've had a poor, rough time, I know, but I'll do my best for to smooth it like for you, I will.

STEVE. See here, Annie—I be comed out of the rain and into the sun once more.

DORRY. [*Leading* GEORGE *forward.*] See how fine Mr. Davis do look—see, isn't he grand ? O, Miss Sims, see how nice the flower do look what Rosie has pinned in his coat ! See, Gran'ma.

JANE. I've enough to do putting away all these glasses which have been messed up. What I wants to know is when I shall get off to bed this night, seeing as 'tis late already and you none of you gone off yet.

DORRY. O, let us be off, let us be off—and what am I to put over my dress, Gran'ma, so as the snow shan't get to it ?

JANE. If you go careful and don't drop it in the snow may be as I'll wrap my big shawl around of you, Dorry, what's hanging behind the door.

ROSE. Give me my cloak, Steve—O, how I do love a bit of dancing, don't you, Mr. Davis ?

GEORGE. I be about as much use in the ball room as one of they great drag horses, Miss Rose.

ROSE. O, get on, Mr. Davis ! I don't believe half what you do say, no more does Annie.

ANNIE. If Mr. Davis don't know how to dance right, you're the one to learn him, Rose. Come, Dorry, you take hold of my hand, and I'll look after you on the way. Good-night, Mrs. Browning. Good-night, Mrs. Reed.

DORRY. Why, Granny's sound asleep, Miss Sims, you know.

JANE. And about time, too. 'Tis to be hoped as we shan't have no more trouble with her till morning.

DORRY. [*Her eyes raised to the door latch.*] Just look, why the latch is up.

ANNIE. Whoever's that, I wonder?

ROSE. 'Tis very likely someone with a horse what's lost a shoe, Steve.

JANE. I guess as 'tis a coffin wanted sudden, George Davis.

STEVE. I bain't a-going to shoe no horses this time of night, not if 'twas the King hisself what stood at the door.

GEORGE. If 'tis a corpse, I guess her'll have to wait till the dancing's finished, then.

[VASHTI *groans in her sleep and turns over in the chair, her face to the fire.*

STEVE. [*Going to the door and speaking loudly.*] Who's there ?

GEORGE. Us'll soon see.

[GEORGE *unbolts the door and opens it, first a little way, and then wide.* MAY *is seen standing in the doorway. Her shawl is drawn over head and the lower part of her face.*

GEORGE. Here's someone what's missed their way, I count.

ROSE. Why, 'tis like the poor thing we seed beneath the hedge, I do believe.

ANNIE Whatever can she want a-coming in here at this time of night !

JANE. [*Advancing firmly.*] 'Tis one of they dirty roadsters what there's too many of, all about the country.

Here, I'll learn you to come to folks' houses this time of night, disturbing of a wedding party. You take and get gone. We don't want such as you in here, we don't.

[MAY *looks fixedly into* JANE'S *face.*

GEORGE. I count 'tis very nigh starved by the cold as she be.

STEVE. Looks like it, and wetted through to the bone.

JANE. Put her out and shut the door, George, and that'll learn the likes of she to come round begging at folks' houses what's respectable.

GEORGE. 'Tis poor work shutting the door on such as her this night.

STEVE. And that 'tis, George, and what's more, I bain't a-going for to do it. 'Tis but a few hours to my wedding, and if a dog was to come to me for shelter I'd not be one to put him from the door.

JANE. 'Tain't to be expected as I shall let a dirty tramp bide in my kitchen when 'tis all cleaned up against to-morrow, Steve.

STEVE. To-morrow, 'tis my day, Mother, and I'll have the choosing of my guests, like. [*Turning to* MAY.] Come you in out of the cold. This night you shall bide fed and warmed, so that, may be, in years to come, 'twill please you to think back upon the eve afore my wedding.

[STEVE *stands back, holding the door wide open.* MAY, *from the threshold, has been looking first on one face and then on another. Suddenly her eyes fall on* ANNIE, *who has moved to* STEVE'S *side, laying her hand on his arm, and with a sudden defiance, she draws herself up and comes boldly into the room as the curtain falls.*

ACT II.—Scene 3.

The same room, two hours later. VASHTI REED *seems to be sleeping as before by the fireside. On the settle* MAY *is huddled, her head bent, the shawl drawn over her face.* JANE BROWNING *moves about, putting away work things, cups and plates, seeing that the window is closed, winding the clock, etc. There is a tap at the outer door and* JANE *opens it.* STEVE, ANNIE *and* DORRY *enter.*

JANE. Whatever kept you so late, Steve, and me a-sitting up for to let you all in and not able to get away to my bed ?

DORRY. O, Gran'ma, it was beautiful, I could have stopped all night, I could. We comed away early 'cause Miss Sims, she said as the dancing gived her the headache, but the New Year han't been danced in yet, it han't.

JANE. You get and dance off to bed, Dorry, that's what you've got to do—and quickly.

DORRY. All right, Gran'ma. Good-night, Miss Sims ; good-night, Dad. O, why, there's Granny ! But her's tight asleep so I shan't say nothing to her. O, I do wish as there was dancing, and lamps, and music playing every night, I do !

[DORRY *goes towards the staircase door.*

JANE. [*Calling after her.*] I'm a-coming along directly. Be careful with the candle, Dorry.

[JANE *opens the door and* DORRY *goes upstairs.* STEVE *and* ANNIE *come towards the fireplace.*

STEVE. Was there aught as you could do for yonder poor thing ?

JANE. Poor thing, indeed ! A good-for-nothing roadster what's been and got herself full of the drink, and that's what's the matter with she. See there, how she do lie, snoring asleep under the shawl of her ; and not a

word nor sound have I got out of she since giving her the drop of tea a while back.

STEVE. Well, well—she won't do us no harm where she do bide. Leave her in the warm till 'tis daylight, then let her go her way.

JANE. She and Gran' be about right company one for t'other, I'm thinking.

STEVE. Ah, that they be. Let them sleep it off and you get up to bed, Mother.

JANE. That I will, Steve. Be you a-going to see Annie safe to home ?

ANNIE. Do you bide here, Steve, and let me run back—'tis but a step—and I don't like for you to come out into the snow again.

STEVE. I'm coming along of you, Annie. Get off to bed, Mother. I'll be back to lock up and all that in less nor ten minutes.

JANE. All right, Steve, and do you cast an eye around to see as I han't left nothing out as might get took away, for 'tis poor work leaving the kitchen to roadsters and gipsies and the like.

[JANE *lights a candle and goes upstairs.* STEVE *takes* ANNIE'S *hand and they go together towards the outer door. As they pass to the other side of the curtain which is drawn across the room,* MAY *suddenly rears herself up on the settle, throwing back her shawl, and she leans forward, listening intently.*

STEVE. To-morrow night, Annie !

ANNIE. There'll be no turning out into the snow for us both, Steve.

STEVE. You'll bide here, Annie, and 'tis more gladness than I can rightly think on, that 'tis.

ANNIE. Steve !

STEVE. Well, Annie.

ANNIE There's summat what's been clouding you a bit this night. You didn't know as how I'd seen it, but 'twas so.

STEVE. Why, Annie, I didn't think as how you'd take notice as I was different from ordinary.

ANNIE. But I did, Steve. And at the dancing there was summat in the looks of you which put me in mind of a thing what's hurted. Steve, I couldn't abide for to see you stand so sad with the music going on and all. So I told you as I'd the headache.

STEVE. O Annie, 'twas thoughts as was too heavy for me, and I couldn't seem to get them pushed aside, like.

ANNIE. How'd it be if you was to tell me, Steve.

STEVE. I don't much care for to, Annie. But 'twas thoughts what comed out of the time gone by, as may be I'd been a bit too hard with—with her as was Dorry's mother.

ANNIE. O, I'm sure, from all I hear, as she had nothing to grumble at, Steve.

STEVE. And there came a fearsome thought, too, Annie, as you might go the same way through not getting on comfortable with me, and me being so much older nor you, and such-like. Annie, I couldn't bear for it to happen so, I could not. For I holds to having you aside of me always stronger nor I holds to anything else in the world, and I could not stand it if 'twas as I should lose you.

ANNIE. There's nothing in the world as could make you lose me, Steve. For, look you here, I don't think as there's a woman on the earth what's got such a feeling as is in my heart this night, of quiet, Steve, and of gladness, because that you and me is to be wed and to live aside of one another till death do part us.

STEVE. Them be good words, Annie, and no mistake.

ANNIE. And what you feels about the days gone by don't count, Steve, 'cause they bain't true of you. You was always a kind husband, and from what I've hear-ed folks say, she was one as wasn't never suited to neither you nor yours.

STEVE. Poor soul, she be dead and gone now, and what I thinks one way or t'other can't do she no good. Only 'tis upon me as I could take you to-morrow more

glad-like, Annie, if so be as I had been kinder to she, the time her was here.

ANNIE. Do you go off to bed, Steve, you're regular done up, and that's what 'tis. I never hear-ed you take on like this afore.

STEVE. All right, my dear, don't you mind what I've been saying. Very like 'tis a bit unnerved as I be this night. But 'tis a good thought, bain't it, Annie, that come to-morrow at this time, there won't be no more need for us to part?

ANNIE. [*As he opens the door.*] O, 'tis dark outside!

[*They both leave the cottage.* MAY *throws back her shawl as though stifled. She gets up and first stands bending over* VASHTI. *Seeing that she is still sleeping heavily, she goes to the door, opens it gently and looks out. After a moment she closes it and walks about the kitchen, examining everything with a fierce curiosity. She takes up the shawl* DORRY *has been wearing, looks at it hesitatingly, and then clasps it passionately to her face. Hearing steps outside she flings it down again on the chair and returns to the settle, where she sits huddled in the corner, having wrapped herself again in her shawl, only her eyes looking out unquietly from it.* STEVE *re-enters. He bolts the door, then goes up to the table in front of the fire to put out the lamp.*

STEVE. Can I get you an old sack or summat for to cover you up a bit this cold night?

[MAY *looks at him for a moment and then shakes her head.*

STEVE. All right. You can just bide where you be on the settle. 'Tis warmer within nor upon the road to-night, and I'll come and let you out when 'tis morning.

[MAY *raises both her hands in an attitude of supplication.*

STEVE. [*Pausing, with his hand on the burner of the*

lamp.] Be there summat as you wants what I can give to you?

[MAY *looks at him for a moment and then speaks in a harsh whisper.*

MAY. Let I bide quiet in the dark, 'tis all I wants now. [STEVE *puts out the lamp.*

STEVE. [*As though to himself, as he goes towards the door upstairs.*] Then get off to your drunken sleep again, and your dreams.

Curtain.

ACT II.—Scene 4.

The fire is almost out. A square of moonlight falls on the floor from the window. VASHTI *still sleeps in the chimney corner.* MAY *is rocking herself to and fro on the settle.*

MAY. Get off to your drunken sleep and to your dreams! Your dreams—your dreams—Ah, where is it as they have gone, I'd like for to know. The dreams as comed to I when I was laid beneath the hedge. Dreams!

[*She gets up, feels down the wall in a familiar way for the bellows—blows up the fire and puts some coal on it gently. Then she draws forward a chair and sits down before it.*

MAY. [*Muttering to herself.*] 'Tis my own hearth when 'tis all said and done.

[*She turns up the front of her skirt and warms herself, looking sharply at* VASHTI REED *now and then.*

[*Presently* VASHTI'S *eyes open, resting, at first unseeingly, and then with recognition, on* MAY'S *face.*

VASHTI. So you be comed back, May. I always knowed as you would.

MAY. How did you know 'twas me, then ?

VASHTI. 'Cause I knowed. There 'tis.

MAY. I be that changed from the times when I would sit a-warming of myself by this here fire.

VASHTI. Ah, and be you changed, May ? My eyes don't see nothing of it, then.

MAY. Ah, I be got into an ugly old woman now, mother, and Steve—Steve, he looked in the face of I and didn't so much as think who 'twas. " Get off to the drunken sleep of you and to your dreams." 'Twas that what he did say to I.

VASHTI. Your old mother do know better nor Steve. Ah, 'tweren't in no shroud as I seed you, May, nor yet with the sod upon the face of you, but stepping, stepping up and down on the earth, through the water what layed on the roads, and on the dry where there be high places, and in the grass of the meadows. That's how 'twas as I did see you, May.

MAY. And I would like to know how 'twas as Steve saw I.

VASHTI. Ah, and there was they as did buzz around as thick as waspes in summer time and as said, " She be under ground and rotting now—that her be." And they seed in I but a poor old woman what was sleeping in the chimney corner, with no hearing to I. " Rotting yourself," I says, and I rears up sudden, " She be there as a great tree and all the leaves of it full out—and you —snakes in the grass, snakes in the grass, all of you ! " There 'tis.

MAY. [*Mockingly.*] " It's a good thought, bain't it, Annie, that to-morrow this time there won't be no need for us to part ? " And in the days when I was a young woman and all the bloom of I upon me, 'twouldn't have been once as he'd have looked on such as her.

VASHTI. And 'tis full of bloom and rare fine and handsome as you appear now, May, leastways to my old eyes. And when you goes up to Steve and shows

yourself, I take it the door'll be shut in the face of the mealy one what they've all been so took up with this long while. I count that 'twill and no mistake. So 'tis.

MAY. [*Fiercely.*] Hark you here, Mother, and 'tis to be wed to-morrow as they be! Wed—the both of them, the both of them! And me in my flesh, and wife to Steve! "Can I cover you up with a bit of old sack or summat?" Old sack! When there be a coverlet with feathers to it stretched over where he do lie upstairs. "I'll let you out when 'tis morning." Ah, you will, will you, Steve Browning? Us'll see how 'twill be when 'tis morning—Us'll see, just won't us then!

VASHTI. Ah, 'tis in her place as th' old woman will be set come morning—And that her'll be—I count as 'tis long enough as her have mistressed it over the house. [*Shaking her fist towards the ceiling.*] You old she fox, you may gather the pads of you in under of you now, and crouch you down t'other side of the fire like any other old woman of your years—for my May's comed back, and her'll show you your place what you've not known where 'twas in all the days of your old wicked life. So 'tis.

MAY. Her han't changed a hair of her, th'old stoat! Soon as I heard the note of she, the heat bubbled up in I, though 'twas chattering in the cold as I had been but a moment afore. "One of they dirty roadsters—I'll learn you to come disturbing of a wedding party, I will." [*Shaking her fist towards the ceiling.*] No, you bain't changed, you hardened old sinner—but the words out of the cruel old mouth of you don't hurt I any more—not they. I be passed out of the power of such as you. I knowed I'd have to face you when I comed back, but I knowed, too, as I should brush you out of the way of me, like I would brush one of they old maid flies.

VASHTI. Ah, and so I telled she many a time. "You bide till my May be comed home," I says. "She be already put safe to bed and 'tis in the churchyard where her do take her rest," says she. Ah, what a great liar that is, th'old woman what's Steve's mother! And the

lies they do grow right out of she tall as rushes, and the wind do blow they to the left and to the right. So 'tis.

MAY. Ah, she han't any more power for to hurt I in the ugly old body of her. I be got beyond she. There be but one or two things as can touch I now—But one or two. And I be struck to the heart, I be, struck to the heart.

[*She bends forwards, rocking herself to and fro and weeping.*

MAY. [*As though speaking to herself.*] Back and fro, back and fro—On the dark of the earth and where 'twas light. When 'twas cold and no sound but the steps of I on the road, and the fox's bark; when 'twas hot and the white dust smouldered in the mouth of I, and things flying did plague I with the wings of they—But 'twas always the same thought as I had—"Some day I shall come back to Steve," I did tell me. And then again—"Some day I shall get and hold Dorry in my arms." And now I be comed. And Steve—and Steve —Ah, I be struck deep to the heart, 'tis so. Struck deep!

VASHTI. You get upstairs to Steve, May. Get you up there and take the place what's yours.

MAY. My place, my place! Where's that I want to know! 'Tis another what's got into the nest now, to lie snug and warm within. And 'tis for I to spread the wings of me and to go out into the storm again. So 'tis.

VASHTI. Get you to Steve, May, and let him but look on the form of you and on the bloom, and us'll see what he will do with t'other hussy then. Ah, they sneaking, mealy wenches what have got fattened up and licked over by th'old woman till 'tis queens as they fancies theirselves, you shall tell they summat about what they be, come morning. And your poor old mother, her'll speak, too, what hasn't been let sound her tongue these years gone by. Ah, hern shall know what us do think of they, hern shall squat upon the floor and hear the truth.

MAY. He thought as I was sleeping; but I looked out on her and seed the way his eyes was cast upon the girl. Steve, if you had cast your eyes on me like that but once, in days gone by—maybe, maybe I'd not have gone out and shut the door behind I.

VASHTI. Get you to Steve and let him see you with the candle lit. Her bain't no match for he, the young weasel! 'Tis you as has the blood of me and my people what was grand folk in times gone by, 'tis you, May, as is the mate for he, above all them white-jowled things what has honey at the mouth of they, but the heart running over with poison—Ah, and what throws you the bone and keeps the meat for their own bellies. What sets the skin afore you and laps the cream theirselves. Vipers, all of them, and she-cats. There 'tis.

MAY. Sit you down, Mother, and keep the tongue of you quiet. We don't want for to waken they.

VASHTI. [*Sitting down heavily.*] But we've got to waken Steve for he to know as how you be comed home again.

MAY. And where's the good of that, when there bain't so much as a board nor a rag, but what's been stole from I?

VASHTI. You go and say to him as 'tis his wife what have come back to her place. And put th'old woman against the chimney there, and let her see you a-cutting of the bread and of the meat, and a-setting out of the food so as that they who be at the table can loose the garments of them when the eating 'tis finished, if they has a mind to, 'stead of drawing they together so not to feel 'tis leer. Ah, 'tis time you be comed, May, 'tis time.

MAY. [*Bitterly.*] I'm thinking 'tis time!

VASHTI. 'Tis the lies of they be growed big as wheat stalks and the hardness of their hearts be worse nor death. But 'tis to judgment as they shall be led, now you be comed home, May, and the hand of God shall catch they when they do crawl like adders upon the earth. "Ah, and do you mind how 'twas you served

old Vashti, what never did harm to no one all the life of her," I shall call out to th' old woman in that hour when her shall be burning in the lake. And her shall beg for a drop of water to lay upon the withered tongue of she, and it shall be denied, for other hands nor ours be at work, and 'tis the wicked as shall perish—yes, so 'tis.

MAY. [*Who has been bending forward, looking steadily into the fire.*] Stop that, Mother, I wants to get at my thoughts.

VASHTI. Be you a-going to set on I, too, May, now that you be comed home. 'Tis poor work for an old woman like I.

MAY. [*As though to herself.*] And as I was laid beneath the hedge—" 'Tis cold as my limbs is, now," I says, " but I shall be warm this night." And the pangs what was in the body of me did fairly quail I—" 'Tis my fill of victuals as I shall soon put within," thinks I. And they was laid a bit. The bleakness of the tempest fell on I, but " I shan't feel lonesome no longer than this hour," I telled me. For to my thinking, Steve, he was waiting all the time till I should be comed back. And Dorry, too. There 'tis. [*A long silence.*

MAY. I'd have been content to bide with the door shut—so long as it was shut with they two and me inside the room—th'old woman—well, I count I shouldn't have took many thought for she—she could have bided in her place if she'd had a mind—I'd have set me down, when once my clothes was decent and clean, and put my hands to the work and made a tidy wife for Steve, as good nor better than that there dressed-up thing out yonder—And bred Dorry up the right way, too, I would. But 'tis done with now, so 'tis.

VASHTI. [*As though to herself.*] And when 'tis morning and she gets her down—" There, 'tis my girl as is mistress here, I'll say to her—and 'tis my girl as shall sit cup end of the table—and you get you to the fire corner and bide there, like the poor old woman as you be, spite that you do slip about so spry on the wicked old legs of you."

MAY. And I could set she back in her place, too, that tricked-up, flashy thing over the way. I've but to climb the stairs and clap my hand on Steve—"Get you from your dreams," I have got but to say, "the woman what's yourn be comed home. Her have tasted the cup of death, very near, and her have been a-thirst and an hungered. But her has carried summat for you in her heart all the way what you wouldn't find in the heart of t'other, no, not if you was to cut it open and search it through." And the right belongs to I to shut the door on t'other hussey, holding Steve to I till death divides we.

VASHTI. Going on the road I seed the eyes of they blinking as I did pass by. "And may the light from out the thunder cloud fall upon you," I says to them, "for 'tis a poor old woman as I be what has lost her child; and what's that to you if so be as the shoes on her feet be broken or no? 'Tis naked as the toes of you shall go, that hour when the days of this world shall be rolled by. Ah, 'tis naked and set on the lake of burning fire as the hoofs of you shall run!"

MAY. I could up and screech so that the house should ring with the sound of me, "I be your wife, Steve, comed back after these many years. What's this that you've got doing with another?" I could take hold on him and make him look into the eyes of I, yes, and th'old woman, too. "See here, your 'dirty roadster,' look well on to her." "Why, 'tis May." But the eyes of him would then be cast so that I should see no more than a house what has dead within, and the blind pulled down. And I, what was thinking as there might be a light in the window!

VASHTI. "And you may holler," I says to them, "you may holler till you be heard over the face of all the earth, but no one won't take no account of you." And the lies of them which have turned into ropes of hempen shall come up and strangle they. But me and my child shall pass by all fatted up and clothed, and with the last flick, afore the eyelids of they drop, they

shall behold we, and, a-clapping of the teeth of them shall they repent them of their sins. Too late, too late! There 'tis.

MAY. Too late! There 'tis, I be comed home too late.

[*She rises and takes up her shawl, wrapping it about her shoulders, and muttering.*

MAY. But I know a dark place full of water—'Tis Simon's pool they calls it—And I warrant as any poor wretch might sleep yonder and be in quiet.

VASHTI. Be you a-going up to Steve now?

MAY. No, I bain't. 'Tis out from here that I be going. And back on to the road.

VASHTI. May, my pretty May, you're never going for to leave I, what's such a poor old woman and wronged cruel. You step aloft and rouse up Steve. He'll never have you go upon the roads again once he do know as you've comed back.

MAY. Steve! What's it to Steve whether the like of I do go or bide? What be there in I for to quell the love of she which Steve's got in him? Dead leaves for new. Ditch water for the clear spring.

VASHTI. Give him to drink of it, May.

MAY. [*Looking upwards to the ceiling.*] No, Steve Hark you here. I bain't a-going to do it. I bain't going to knock over the spoonful of sweet what you be carrying to your mouth. You take and eat of it in quiet and get you filled with the honey. 'Tain't my way to snatch from no one so that the emptiness which I has in me shall be fed. There, 'tis finished now, very nigh, and the sharpness done. And, don't you fear, Steve, as ever I'll trouble you no more.

VASHTI. [*Rising.*] I be a-going to fetch him down, and that's what I'm a-going for to do.

MAY. [*Pushing her back into her chair.*] Harken you, Steve, he's never got to know as I've been here.

VASHTI. I tell you, May, I'll screech till he do come!

MAY. [*Sitting down by* VASHTI *and laying her hand on her.*] I'll put summat in your mouth as'll stop you

if you start screeching, mother. Why, hark you here. 'Tis enough of this old place as I've had this night, and 'tis out upon the roads as I be going. Th'old woman—there's naught much changed in she—And Steve—well, Steve be wonderful hard in the soul of him. "Can I get you an old sack," says he—and never so much as seed 'twas I—Ah—'tis more than enough to turn the stomach in anyone—that it is. [*A slight pause.*

MAY. I was never a meek one as could bide at the fireside for long. The four walls of this here room have very near done for me now, so they have. And 'tis the air blowing free upon the road as I craves—Ah, and the wind which hollers, so that the cries of we be less nor they of lambs new born.

VASHTI. God bless you, May, and if you goes beyond the door 'tis the mealy-faced jade will get in come morning, for Steve to wed.

MAY. So 'tis. And if I stopped 'twould be the same, her'd be between us always, the pretty cage bird—For look you here on I, Mother, and here—[*pointing to her feet*]—and here—and here—See what's been done to I what's knocked about in the world along the roads, and then think if I be such a one as might hold the love of Steve.

VASHTI. [*Beginning to whine desolately.*] O, do not you go for to leave your old mammy again what has mourned you as if you was dead all the years. Do not you go for to leave I and the wicked around of I as might be the venomous beasts in the grass. Stop with I, my pretty child—Stop along of your old mother, for the days of I be few and numbered, and the enemies be thick upon the land.

MAY. Hark you here, Mother, and keep your screeching till another time. I wants to slip out quiet so as Steve and th'old woman won't never know as I've been nigh. And if you keeps your mouth shut, maybe I'll drop in at our own place on the hill one of these days and bide comfortable along of you, only now—I'm off, do you hear ?

VASHTI. I can't abide for you to go. 'Tis more nor I can stand. Why, if you goes, May, 'tis t'other wench and th'old woman what'll get mistressing it here again in your place. [*Rising up.*] No—you shan't go. I'll holler till I've waked them every one—you shan't! My only child, my pretty May! Ah, 'tis not likely as you shall slip off again. 'Tis not.

MAY. Look you here, Mother—bide still, I say. [*Looking round the room distractedly.*] See here—'tis rare dry as I be. You bide quiet and us'll have a drink together, that us will. Look, th'old woman's forgot to put away the bottle, us'll wet our mouths nice and quiet, mother—she won't hear I taking out the cork, nor nothing. See!

[MAY *gets up and crosses the room; she takes the bottle off the shelf where she has just perceived it, and also two glasses; she fills one and hands it to her mother.*

VASHTI. [*Stretching out her hand.*] 'Tis rare dry and parched as I be, now I comes to think on it, May.

MAY. That's right—drink your fill, Mother.

VASHTI. 'Tis pleasant for I to see you mistressing it here again, May.

MAY. Ah, 'tis my own drink and all, come to that.

VASHTI. So 'tis. And the tea what she gived me was but ditch water. I seed her spoon it in the pot, and 'twas not above a half spoon as her did put in for I, th'old badger. My eye was on she, though, and her'll have it cast up at she when the last day shall come and the trumpet sound and all flesh stand quailing, and me and mine looking on at her as is brought to judgment. How will it be then, you old sinner, says I.

MAY. [*Re-filling the glass.*] Take and drink this little drop more, mother.

[VASHTI *drinks and then leans back in her chair again with half closed eyes.*

MAY. [*Putting away the bottle and glasses.*] Her'll sleep very like, now. And when her wakes, I take it 'twill appear as though she'd been and dreamt summat.

VASHTI. Do you sit a-nigh me, May. The night be a wild one. I would not have you be on the roads.

MAY. [*Sitting down beside her.*] O, the roads be fine on nights when the tempest moves in the trees above and the rain falls into the mouth of you and lies with a good taste on your tongue. And you goes quick on through it till you comes to where the lights do blink, and 'tis a large town and there be folk moving this way and that and the music playing, and great fowls and horses what's got clocks to the inside of they, a-stirring them up for to run, and girls and men a-riding on them—And the booths with red sugar and white, all lit and animals that's wild a-roaring and a-biting in the tents—And girls what's dancing, standing there in satin gowns all over gold and silver—And you walks to and fro in it all and 'tis good to be there and free—And 'tis better to be in such places and to come and to go where you have a mind than to be cooped in here, with th'old woman and all—'Tis a fine life as you lives on the roads—and 'tis a better one nor this, I can tell you, Mother.

VASHTI. [*Who has gradually been falling into sleep.*] I count 'tis so. 'Tis prime in the freshening of the day. I count I'll go along of you, come morning.

MAY. That's it, Mother, that's it. Us'll take a bit of sleep afore we sets off, won't us ? And when morning comes, us'll open the door and go out.

VASHTI. That's it, when 'tis day.

[*Her head falls to one side of the chair and she is presently asleep.*

[MAY *watches her for some moments. Then she gets up softly and wraps her shawl round her. The window shews signs of a gray light outside,* MAY *goes quietly towards the outer door. As she reaches it,* DORRY *comes into the room from the staircase.*

DORRY. [*Going up to* VASHTI.] Granny, 'tis the New Year"! I'm come down to see to the fire and to get breakfast for Dad and Gran'ma. Why, Granny, you're

sleeping still. And where's that poor tramp gone off to ?

[*She looks round the room and then sees* MAY *by the door.*

DORRY. O, there you are. Are you going out on the road afore 'tis got light ?

MAY. [*In a hoarse whisper.*] And that I be. 'Tis very nigh to daybreak, so 'tis.

DORRY. Stop a moment. [*Calling up the stairs.*] Daddy, the tramp woman, she's moving off already.

STEVE. [*From upstairs.*] Then give her a bit of bread to take along of she. I don't care that anyone should go an-hungered this day.

DORRY. [*Turning to* MAY.] There—you bide a minute whilst I cuts the loaf. My Dad's going to get married this day, and he don't care that anyone should go hungry.

[MAY *comes slowly back into the room and stands watching* DORRY, *who fetches a loaf from the pantry and cuts it at the table. Then she pulls aside the curtain and a dim light comes in.*

DORRY. The snow's very nigh gone, and 'tis like as not as the sun may come out presently. Here's a piece of bread to take along of you. There, it's a good big piece, take and eat it.

[MAY *hesitates an instant, then she stretches out her hand and takes the bread and puts it beneath her shawl.*

MAY. And so there's going to be a wedding here to-day ?

DORRY. 'Tis my Dad as is to be married.

MAY. 'Tis poor work, is twice marrying.

DORRY. My Dad's ever so pleased, I han't seen him so pleased as I can remember, I han't.

MAY. Then maybe the second choosing be the best.

DORRY. Yes, 'tis—Gran'ma says as 'tis—and Dad, he be ever so fond of Miss Sims—and I be, too.

MAY. Then you've no call to wish as her who's gone should come back to you, like ?

DORRY. What's that you're saying ?

MAY. You don't never want as your mammy what you've lost should be amongst you as afore ?

DORRY. I never knowed my mammy. Gran'ma says she had got summat bad in her blood. And Granny's got the same. But Miss Sims, she's ever so nice to Dad and me, and I'm real pleased as she's coming to stop along of us always after that they're married, like.

MAY. And th'old woman what's your gran'ma, Dorry ?

DORRY. However did you know as I was called " Dorry " ?

MAY. I heard them call you so last night.

DORRY. And whatever do you want to know about Gran'ma ?

MAY. What have her got to say 'bout the—the—wench what's going to marry your dad ?

DORRY. O, Gran'ma, she thinks ever such a lot of Miss Sims, and she says as how poor Dad, what's been served so bad, will find out soon what 'tis to have a real decent wife, what'll help with the work and all, and what won't lower him by her ways, nor nothing.

MAY. Look you here—'tis growing day. I must be getting off and on to the road.

DORRY. [*Moving to the door.*] I'll unbolt the door, then. O, 'tis fine and daylight now.

MAY. [*Turning back at the doorway and looking at the room.*] I suppose you wouldn't like to touch me, for good luck, Dorry ?

DORRY. No, I shouldn't. Gran'ma, she don't let me go nigh road people as a rule. She's a-feared as I should take summat from them, I suppose.

MAY. [*Hoarsely, her hand on the door.*] Then just say as you wishes me well, Dorry.

DORRY. I'll wish you a good New Year, then, and Gran'ma said as I was to watch as you cleared off the place. [MAY *goes out softly and quickly.* DORRY *watches her until she is out of sight, and then she shuts the door.*

ACT III.—Scene 1.

The same room. It is nearly mid-day, and the room is full of sunshine. JANE BROWNING, *in her best dress, is fastening* DORRY'S *frock, close to the window.*

DORRY. Dad's been a rare long time a-cleaning of his self up, Gran.

JANE. Will you bide still! However's this frock to get fastened and you moving this way and that like some live eel—and just see what a mark you've made on the elbow last night, putting your arm down somewhere where you didn't ought to—I might just as well have never washed the thing.

DORRY. Granny's sound asleep still—she'll have to be waked time we goes along to the church.

JANE. That her shan't be. Her shall just bide and sleep the drink out of her, her shall. Do you think as I didn't find out who 'twas what had got at the bottle as Dad left on the dresser last night.

DORRY. Poor Gran, she do take a drop now and then.

JANE. Shame on th'old gipsy. Her shall be left to bide till she have slept off some of the nonsense which is in her.

DORRY. Granny do say a lot of funny things sometimes, don't she, now?

JANE. You get and put on your hat and button your gloves, and let the old gipsy be. We can send her off home when 'tis afternoon, and us back from church. Now, where did I lay that bonnet? Here 'tis.

[*She begins to tie the strings before a small mirror in the wall.* STEVE *comes downstairs in his shirt sleeves, carrying his coat.*

DORRY. Why, Dad, you do look rare pleased at summat.

STEVE. And when's a man to look pleased if 'tis not on his wedding morn, Dorry?

DORRY. The tramp what was here did say as how 'twas poor work twice marrying, but you don't find it be so, Dad, do you now ?

STEVE. And that I don't, my little wench. 'Tis as nigh heaven as I be like to touch—and that's how 'tis with me.

JANE. [*Taking* STEVE'S *coat from him.*] Ah, 'tis a different set out altogether this time. That 'tis. 'Tis a-marrying into your own rank, like, and no mixing up with they trolloping gipsies.

DORRY. Was my own mammy a trolloping gipsy, Gran ?

JANE. [*Beginning to brush* STEVE'S *coat.*] Ah, much in the same pattern as th'old woman what's drunk asleep against the fireside. Here, button up them gloves, 'tis time we was off.

DORRY. I do like Miss Sims. She do have nice things on her. When I grows up I'd like to look as she do, so I would.

STEVE. [*To* JANE.] There, Mother, that'll do. I'd best put him on now.

JANE. [*Holding out the coat for him.*] Well, and you be got yourself up rare smart, Steve.

STEVE. 'Tis rare smart as I be feeling, Mother. I'm all a kind of a dazzle within of me, same as 'tis with the sun upon the snow out yonder.

JANE. Why, look you, there's George a-coming up the path already.

DORRY. He's wearing of the flower what Rosie gived him last night.

STEVE. [*Opening the door.*] Good morning, George. A first class New Year to you. You're welcome, if ever a man was.

JANE. You bide where you do stand, George, till your feet is dry. My floor was fresh wiped over this morning.

GEORGE. [*Standing on the door mat.*] All right, Mrs. Browning. Don't you fluster. Good morning, Dorry. How be you to-day, Steve ?

JANE. Dorry, come you upstairs along with me and get your coat put on, so as your frock bain't crushed.

DORRY. O, I wish I could go so that my nice frock was seen and no coat.

[*They go upstairs.* GEORGE *rubs his feet on the mat and comes into the room, walking up and down once or twice restlessly and in evident distress of mind.*

STEVE. [*Who has lit a pipe and is smoking.*] Why, George, be you out of sorts this morning? You don't look up to much, and that's the truth.

GEORGE. [*Stopping before* STEVE.] Hark you, Steve. 'Tis on my mind to ask summat of you. Did you have much speech with the poor thing what you took in from the snow last night?

STEVE. No, George, and that I didn't. Her was mostly in a kind of drunken sleep all the time, and naught to be got out from she. Mother, her tried. But 'twas like trying to get water from the pump yonder, when 'tis froze.

GEORGE. Your mother's a poor one at melting ice, Steve, and 'tis what we all knows.

STEVE. Ah, 'twasn't much as we could do for the likes of she—what was a regular roadster. Bad herbs, all of them. And if it hadn't been so as 'twas my wedding eve, this one shouldn't have set foot inside of the house. But 'tis a season when a man's took a bit soft and foolish, like, the night afore his marriage. Bain't that so, George?

GEORGE. And when was it, Steve, as she went off from here?

STEVE. That I couldn't rightly say, George, but I counts 'twas just upon daybreak. And 'twas Dorry what seed her off the place and gived her a piece of bread to take along of her.

GEORGE. And do you think as she got talking a lot to Dorry, Steve?

STEVE. I'm blest if I do know, George. I never gived another thought to she. What's up!

GEORGE. They was getting the body of her from out of Simon's Pool as I did come by. That's all.

STEVE. From Simon's Pool, George ?

GEORGE. I count her must have went across the plank afore 'twas fairly daylight. And, being slippery, like, from the snow, and her—her—as you did say.

STEVE. In liquor.

GEORGE. I reckon as her missed her footing, like.

STEVE. Well, upon my word, George, who'd have thought on such a thing !

GEORGE. I count as her had been in the water and below the ice a smartish while afore they catched sight of she.

STEVE. Well, 'tis a cold finish to a hot life.

GEORGE. They took and laid her on the grass, Steve, as I comed by.

STEVE. If it had been me, I'd have turned the head of me t'other side.

GEORGE. There was summat in the fashion her was laid, Steve, as drawed I near for to get a sight of the face of she.

STEVE. Well, I shouldn't have much cared for that, George.

GEORGE. Steve—did you get a look into the eyes of yon poor thing last night ?

STEVE. No, nor wanted for to, neither.

GEORGE. There was naught to make you think of——

STEVE. Of what, George ?

GEORGE. There—Steve, I can't get it out, I can't.

STEVE. Then let it bide in.

GEORGE. 'Twas the way her was laid, and the long arms of she, and the hands which was clapped one on t'other, as it might be in church.

STEVE. [*Looking through the window.*] You shut up, George. Here's Annie with Rose a-coming up to the door. Don't you get saying another word about yon poor wretch nor the end of her. I wouldn't have my Annie upset for all the world to-day. 'Tis a thing as

must not be spoke of afore they, nor Dorry neither, do you hear ?

[*He moves towards the door and puts his hand to the latch.*

GEORGE. Hold back, Steve, a minute. There's summat more as I've got to say.

STEVE. You take and shut your mouth up, old George, afore I opens the door to the girls.

GEORGE. 'Tis bound for to come from me afore you goes along to church, Steve.

STEVE. I warrant 'twill keep till us do come home again, George.

[*He throws the door wide open with a joyous movement.* ANNIE *and* ROSE *in white dresses stand outside.*

STEVE. Well, Annie, this is a rare surprise, and that's the truth. [ANNIE *and* ROSE *come into the room.*

ROSE. Father, he's outside, and Jim and Bill and Katie, and all the rest. We said as 'twould be pleasanter if we was all to go up together along to the church.

STEVE. So 'twould be—so 'twould be—'Twas a grand thought of yourn, Rosie.

ANNIE. Steve——

STEVE. [*Taking her hand.*] Annie, I'm fair beside myself this day.

ANNIE. O, Steve, there was never a day in my life like this one. [DORRY *and* JANE *come down.*

DORRY. O, Miss Sims, you do look nice ! Gran'ma, don't Miss Sims look nice ? And Rosie, too. O, they have nice gowns and hats on, haven't they, Dad ?

STEVE. I don't see no gowns nor hats, and that's the truth. But I sees summat what's like—what's like a meadow of grass in springtime afore the sun's got on to it.

DORRY. Why, Dad, 'tis white, not green, as Miss Sims is wearing.

STEVE. 'Tis in the eyes of her as I finds my meadow.

DORRY. O, let me see, Dad, let me look, too!

ROSE. [*Going up to* GEORGE, *who has been standing aloof and moody in the background.*] Come, Mr. Davis, we must have a look, too.

JANE. Get along, get along. We han't time for such foolishness. It be close on twelve already.

ANNIE. O, let me be, all of you! I declare, I don't know which way to look, I don't.

STEVE. I'll show you, Annie, then.

ROSE. [*To* GEORGE.] Well, Mr. Davis, you don't seem over bright this morning.

STEVE. 'Tis with the nerves as he be took!

DORRY. Look at what he's wearing in his buttonhole, Rosie.

ROSE. 'Tis kept beautiful and fresh.

STEVE. Come on, come on, all of you. 'Tis time we was at the church.

ROSE. Hark to him! He's in a rare hurry for to get out of the house to-day.

GEORGE. Bain't the old lady a-coming?

JANE. That she bain't, the old drinking gipsy—'tis at the spirits as her got in the night—and put away very near the best part of a bottle. Now she's best left to sleep it off, she be.

STEVE. Come on, George. Come, Dorry.

DORRY. O, isn't it a pity as Granny will get at the drink, Mr. Davis? And isn't Miss Sims nice in her white dress? And don't Dad look smiling and pleased? I never did know Dad smile like this afore.

GEORGE. [*Heavily.*] Come on, Dorry—you take hold of me. You and me, we'll keep nigh one to t'other this day, won't us?

ROSIE. [*Calling from outside.*] Come on, Mr. Davis.

[*They all go out.*

ACT III.—Scene 2.

Nearly an hour later. The cottage room is full of sunlight. VASHTI REED *is awake and gazing vacantly about her from the same chair by the fire. Someone knocks repeatedly at the door from outside.*

VASHTI. And 'tis no bit of rest as I gets for my bones, but they must come and hustle I and call I from the dreams which was soft. [*The knocking is heard again.*

VASHTI. And I up and says to they, "Ah, and you would hustle a poor old woman what's never harmed so much as a hair out of the ugly heads of you. You would hunt and drive of her till she be very nigh done to death. But there shall come a day when you shall be laid down and a-taking of your bit of rest, and the thing what you knows of shall get up upon you and smite you till you do go screeching from the house, and fleeing to the uttermost part of the land—whilst me and mine——"

[*The door opens and* HARRY MOSS *enters.*

HARRY. Beg pardon, old Missis, but I couldn't make no one hear me.

VASHTI. Seeing as them be sick of the abomination which was inside of they. [*Perceiving* HARRY.] Well, and what be you as is comed into this room?

HARRY. 'Tis Moss as I be called, old Missis. And as I was a-going by this place, I thought as I'd look in a moment, just for to ask how 'twas with May.

VASHTI. They be all gone out from the house. All of them. They be in clothes what do lie in boxes most of the time with lumps of white among they. Them be set out in the best as they has, and in grand things of many colours. There 'tis.

HARRY. And be you th'old lady what's Steve's mother?

VASHTI. I be not, sir. 'Tis mother to May as I be.

May, what's comed back, and what'll set t'other old vixen in her place soon as they get home.

HARRY. Then May, she be gone out, too, have her ?

VASHTI. [*Looking round vaguely.*] Ah, I counts as her be gone to church along of t'other.

HARRY. To church, Missis ?

VASHTI. There's marrying being done down here to-day.

HARRY. Marrying, be there ? Well, but I was 'most feared as how it might have been t'other thing.

VASHTI. Ah, that there be—marrying. But there bain't no more victuals got into the house as I knows of. Th'old woman's seen to that.

HARRY. And be May gone out, too, along of them to see the marrying ?

VASHTI. Ah, I counts as her be. But her's a-coming back in a little while, and you may sit down and bide till she does.

HARRY. I'd sooner be about and on my way, Missis, if 'tis all the same to you. But I thanks you kindly. And you get and tell May when she do come home, that 'tis particular glad I be for to know as her bain't took worse, nor nothing. And should I happen in these parts again, 'tis very likely as I'll take a look in on she some day.

VASHTI. Ah, her'll have got t'other old baggage set in the right place by then.

HARRY. [*Looking round him.*] Well, I be rare pleased to think of May so comfortable, like, for her was got down terrible low.

VASHTI. T'other 'll be broughted lower.

HARRY. Look you here, old Missis, 'tis a stomach full of naught as I carries. If so be as you has a crust to spare——

VASHTI. [*Pointing to a door.*] There be a plate of meat inside of that cupboard. You take and fill your belly with it.

HARRY. Thank you kindly, Missis, but I counts I han't the time for heavy feeding this morning.

VASHTI. 'Twould serve she right, th'old sinner, for the place to be licked up clean, against the time when her was come'd back, so 'twould.

HARRY. Well, Missis, you can tell May 'tis a brave New Year as I do wish she.

VASHTI. [*Listening to bells which are heard suddenly ringing.*] There, there they be! Harken to them! 'Tis with bells as they be coming out. Bells what's ringing. I count 'tis fine as May do look now in her marriage gown. Harken, 'tis the bells a-shaking of the window pane. I be an old woman, but the hearing of me bain't spoiled.

HARRY. I warrant it bain't, Missis. Why, they're ringing wonderful smart. 'Tis enough, upon my word, for to fetch down every stone of the old place.

VASHTI. Get you out upon the garden path and tell I if you sees them a-coming.

HARRY. That's it, old Missis, and so I will.

[*He goes outside the house.*

VASHTI. [*Sitting upright and looking with fixed vacancy before her.*] And when they was all laid low and the heads of them bowed. "You would, would you," I says, for they was lifting the ends of their ugly mouths at I. And I passed among they and them did quail and crouch, being with fear. And me and mine did reach the place what was on the top. "See now yourselves," I says, "if so be that you do not go in blindness and in dark." 'Twas May what stood there aside of I. And "Look you," I says, "over the bended necks of you my child shall pass. For you be done to death by the lies which growed within you and waxed till the bodies of you was fed with them and the poison did gush out from your lips." But my little child stood in the light, and the hands of her was about the stars.

HARRY. [*Coming in.*] Look, they be all a-coming over the meadow, old Missis. But May han't comed with they—May han't come too.

[*The wedding party enters the room as the curtain falls.*]

PRINTED BY
W. HEFFER & SONS LTD.
CAMBRIDGE, ENGLAND.

